WHISPER IN THE WOODS

Shimmering Lake Summer Camp - Book One

A Silent Woods Story

LAIKA WALLACE

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A Silent Woods story

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To my first group of Internet friends. I don't remember most of your names, and we never met in person, but I carry you with me everywhere I go.

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Chapter One (Ronnie)

"Where were you that night?"

I knew the area well enough that I could just walk and I'd know where I was going. Around the back of my house, across the big road and the school parking lot, past the portable with the medical skeleton at the door, past the football goal, all the way to the end of the field. Beside the creek that divided the tree-dense park from the schoolyard. Over the bridge with my phone light guiding the way, careful not to look in the water. Silent the whole time.

"What did you see?"

Not a lot, considering I was still wearing my sunglasses. They were more of a comfort than a necessity in the dark. The crunch of frosty grass and leaves stopped as I got to the far end of the park. I felt the eyes of the school on my back: dark windows and empty classrooms.

"How did you feel?"

Cement lapped at my toes like the water does at Mooney's Bay, the beach I always used to go to as a kid. I got painful sunburns every time but I loved it. I loved this significantly less. It was cold, through my down jacket and my skin and fat and bones and right into my heart. The kind of cold that settles and makes your tongue feel stiff at the back, like your body knows

something bad is about to happen.

"Can you tell me what you were doing before this happened?"

There were two garbage bins on the other side of the cement circle, only a few feet away from me, and behind them there were houses. The bins for this neighborhood; I knew that because we had our bins right behind our houses too. I'd taken the trash out in the morning before cleaning my room and playing video games.

"Do you remember what happened after?"

One of the bins here was propped open by a whole lot of bags and boxes and something else, something… Tall, lurching, ugly. It was hard to see, being obscured in the shadows. It was all dark but somehow this was a different kind of dark. Kind of like I saw it with a different kind of eyes than the ones in my head. I wanted to get closer. My eyes wouldn't focus on it until suddenly it was all I could see.

"Is there anything you remember, Ronnie? Is there anything you can tell me at all?"

I felt like I was being shouted awake, or like I had stayed inside all day in the dark before going outside in the middle of the afternoon and getting a massive headache from the brightness of the sky. It was like the entire world had turned up twelve notches of something that hurt every part of me. I've never been struck by lightning, but I'd like to think that's how it feels.

"You have to talk to us if you want us to help you, Ronnie. We can't read your mind."

I blinked a few times, my eyes focusing on the nothing I was looking at. Gray carpet on slightly grayer wall. Sweeping a hand through my rat's nest of brown hair as I sat up straight, keeping my eyes firmly off the guidance counselor's face, I shrugged.

Mr. Poll was all bones. He had wispy hair and a wispier

beard, and these skeletal hands that I could've ignored if he didn't insist on shaking my hand every time he saw me. His skin was like an orange peel. He had a calming voice, though, and he never tried to tell me he knows what I'm feeling like the other counselor here, so I was stuck with him.

He tilted his head and pushed his tiny glasses further down his nose, staring at me like that would make me talk. "What was that in response to?"

"I already told you what happened. You don't need to make me say it again, just read your file."

"You told me you didn't know what happened. You'd gone out for a walk like you usually do, and when you got to the dumpsters in the neighborhood behind the school, you… Blank." Mr. Poll held the word in the air, but he wasn't waiting for me to fill it in. "You said you didn't know how you got home, only that when you got to the door, you woke your mother and, again, blank. Nobody knows what happened after but you."

I sucked at my teeth, my stomach feeling tight. "Yeah, it's between me and my mom. Do you have to know for some legal reason? Because I'm pretty sure you were already told to lay off."

He paused.

"Ronnie, I'm just trying to help you. This is for your benefit alone."

"How does this benefit me? I don't have anything to talk about," I hissed, my hand firmly clamped to the back of my neck so it wouldn't shake. My leg started bouncing instead. "I don't see why any of this matters to you. It's not like you were there."

He started to say something again, but there didn't seem to be air behind it. I met his eyes for an uncomfortably long time, watching him think, my mind completely blank. All I could

hear was the slow procession of blood through my body.

"I should let you get to lunch before the rush, Ronnie," he finally said, very pointedly. "We'll see each other tomorrow, same time. Does that work for you?"

I shrugged, all but slamming my hands on the arms of the chair. I didn't skip a beat grabbing my bag, getting up, mumbling a goodbye, and shooting out the door. By the time the bell rang and the halls were flooded with students, I was at my locker and halfway ready to go home. I didn't think about the people around me, letting the smoothness of routine guide my body. Combination, open locker, grab my hat and put it on, close and lock my locker, go to the left and exit the building. I tucked my hands into the sleeves of my bomber jacket, keeping my head at an angle where my hat kept the sun off my face but I could still see ahead of me. The walk across the grass, parking lot, and big road wasn't long, but the summer sun was really hot today and I didn't want to deal with sunburns on my hands again.

When I got to my door, I nearly walked right into her.

She had barely changed: she was still a little taller than me, chubby and visibly stronger than me, with long braids dotted by colorful beads. She was still wearing tie dye and denim exclusively. Was that the same jean jacket as I'd last seen her in, five years ago?

I stared at her for a minute, at a loss for what to do. I held my keys in my hand, still poised to unlock my door, unsure what to do first.

"Hey," she said eventually, smiling anxiously.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, trying to keep my body language neutral since I'd failed to do so with my tone.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said, firm and businesslike. She

straightened her back and folded her hands in front of her. "It's been way too long. I've seen you around school and I don't think it's fair to either of us that we're ignoring each other. It sucks for me, anyway. I miss you."

"That's… Yeah. I want to talk to you too. I've been thinking about you."

"Have you?" Her tone softened. "That makes me really happy, Ronnie…"

I sucked at my teeth, looking down. "I'm glad. I… I'm about to go in for lunch…"

"I'll join you."

I looked up at her again, blinking.

"If that's okay, of course. I don't want to be too pushy."

Smiling hesitantly, I nodded. She moved so I could open my door, apologizing for being in the way. I asked if she had a lunch.

"We have food," Mom said, appearing only a few feet from the door, as though she materialized from the shadows.

She was wearing her hair down so it tickled her waist, glossy and black. She had her plush pink housecoat on, and her matching bunny slippers. She was wearing big, gaudy rings on every finger but the marriage one, and she had a glass of raspberry lemonade. Our special recipe. The only off-putting thing about her was her deathly pale face and her intense blue eyes. At least, that's what people said; I always found comfort in the things about her that scared other people.

"Nice to see you again, Cherry," she said, her rings tinking against the glass as she adjusted her grip. "It's been a long time."

"Nice to see you again, Ronnie's Mom," Cherry mumbled, her voice faltering a bit.

Mom laughed and welcomed her inside. "I've made a new

batch of my medical lemonade today, so we're out of the regular stuff, unfortunately. You can help yourself to anything else in the fridge though."

Cherry and I took off our shoes and followed Mom upstairs, thanking her. I felt like things should be a lot more awkward than she was making it, but I was happy for the help. I didn't think I'd ever speak to Cherry again. It was my fault we weren't talking, anyway.

Well, it was my choice.

In the kitchen, I was a little stressed. I had to make a regular salad for lunch, since Cherry was here, and I was getting hungry. Our lemonade only did so much; it was honestly more of a treat than a meal. Cherry already had a sandwich in her bag, so she didn't take any of our food.

"Come sit in the living room," Mom's voice floated in from behind the wall.

I felt like I had to give Cherry a tour of the place, even though nothing had changed. We walked together to the couch and sat down a good bit apart. Mom sat in her rocking chair. Something was on the television, but I wasn't paying attention. I was too focused on the way my hands shook too much to get anything on my fork.

"Are you feeling okay?" Cherry asked me, unwrapping her sandwich.

"Yeah," I said sharply.

Mom gave me a specific look from across the room. "My son, could you do me a favor and switch my laundry to the dryer? I was going to do that now since I have a date soon, but I'd like to catch up with your friend."

"Of course." I put my salad bowl down on the floor and hurried upstairs. I went into the laundry room and switched the

load of blankets to the dryer, moving slowly. Beside the washing machine, there was a small fridge and a freezer. I opened the fridge and took out one of the water bottles inside. I checked the date to make sure it was still good, then unscrewed the cap and took a long drink of the cool, coppery blood. It was thick from being in the fridge, but I didn't mind. It would've been better as dressing, but I did what I had to. When I was finished, I used my phone camera to make sure there was no blood on my lips or teeth, then set the dryer and ran back downstairs.

Mom smiled at me and thanked me as I sat back down.

"What did I miss?" I said, a little too fast. My heart was racing and I didn't really know what I was supposed to be doing here.

"I was just telling your mom how things have been going at home, with my family's restaurant. I work there now," Cherry filled me in. "I'm getting paid and everything. I got all my volunteer hours at the thrift store downtown so my dad hired me for the weekends. He says I should be saving up for university."

"That's great," I said. "Do you know where you want to go?"

She shrugged. "Nowhere, probably. But I can decide next year. What about you?"

"Why nowhere?" I asked, carefully moving the discussion away from me and my lack of plans for my future.

"I like working, and it's not like I gotta be taught how to cook. If my co-op next year works out, I'll be working at a really fancy place, so that'll look good on resumes. I don't want the debt, too."

I nodded understandingly. "That makes sense."

"So," Mom piped up, "Cherry tells me you've been talking for a few days. Is that right?"

I glanced between the two of them, bewildered. "No," I said,

trying to keep the edge out of my voice. "She must have meant she's been thinking of talking to me for a few days."

Cherry looked at me for a second, then stiffly agreed.

Mom looked at her phone and quietly said her date had arrived. She took off her housecoat to reveal a long sleeved black shirt, then picked up a wide brimmed sun hat from the table. She said goodbye to both of us, giving me a look that said we'll be talking later. Which was fine. I liked talking to my mother. I didn't feel like I was under the hot lights at all.

Cherry and I got up at the same time. We just sort of knew how to leave my house, like this was normal, like this wasn't happening. I zipped my jacket up and made sure my hat was firmly on as she got her things together. As soon as Mom had closed the door, Cherry and I turned to each other.

"Why are you lying to my mother?" I all but snapped at her.

"I'm sorry, I got scared," she pleaded, holding her bag to her chest. "She asked why I was talking to you again and I said we ran into each other and we've been talking for a few days."

"That's not true."

"It's not wholly a lie."

"The time frame is," I said, shoving my hands into my pockets. I dug around for my keys, looking darkly at the door. "You don't just lie to my mother like that. You don't lie to her at all."

She sighed, upset. "I figured it would've felt better than to admit that you'd been hiding from me for five years and I had to show up at your door to get you back as a friend."

"Why would I feel good about lying to my mother?" I hissed.

"I'm sorry, I should've thought about that," she said, quieter now, like everything had been driven out of her.

"Who says we're friends, anyway," I murmured angrily, but regretted it right away. I threw the door open and stepped

outside. The energy in that action had deflated my anger. I apologized.

"No," she said, stepping gingerly over the threshold, "it's okay. I shouldn't have assumed anything like that. And I shouldn't have lied. Honestly I could've just not shown up and avoided all this…"

"No no no, stop that," I said, wanting to reach out to her but drawing back. "I wanted to see you again. I want to be your friend. I shouldn't have said that, I was angry and it wasn't fair or true. I'm sorry. Even if you did hurt me by lying, I'm not that mad. No damage was done. I forgive you."

She put her bag on, moving slowly. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I've had five years to think about this. I regret leaving you."

She paused, then sighed softly. "I regret letting you leave me. Thank you for not hating me."

"No, thank you for not hating me."

She waved me off, still a little shy. "Thank you for letting me back in."

I repeated her and she snorted.

"And thank you for forgiving me for lying," she concluded.

I couldn't repeat that, so I thanked her for just being her, and she laughed her bright and bubbly laugh. My heart hurt. I had missed her a lot more than I let myself believe.

"Promise we'll talk, okay?"

I nodded. "We'll talk. I promise."

She almost smiled.

"Here," I said, taking out my phone like it was a bigger action than removing something from my pocket. "Can I get your number?"

She smiled for real this time, but looked embarrassed. "I still

have yours. I'll text you, okay?"

"It's different, actually," I said, and gave it to her.

We smiled and waved goodbye, then I locked the door as she walked off across the parking lot. Seconds later, I was following her, and we caught up crossing the street. She laughed and we joked about how awkward that was, then walked each other to class.

Chapter Two (Morgan)

My neighborhood was full of kids running around and playing together, unsupervised, overflowing with the imagination and boundless trust of youth. Watching their roving packs as I stalked back home from the gas station, clutching my chocolate bar, I was nostalgic. Not for anything I ever had, though. It was bitter and made my stomach turn, almost enough to make me not want this chocolate. I unwrapped it a few steps later and it was finished before I opened my door, which again was only a handful of meters away.

My family kind of hated that they chose to live practically beside the gas station, and not just because of the noise. We were far enough that the smell didn't reach us, but it bothered me so much I had to keep my room smelling like whatever cologne my parents threw at me. Their biggest problem was that I always found enough pocket change to buy junk food, every day, for the past eight years. I could walk there and back with my eyes closed, and I would still come home with a bag of chips.

I ducked inside my cold house, kicking my shoes off and gliding upstairs on the pads of my feet. The only noise I made at all wasn't my fault. My door creaks. I'm convinced Mommy did something to it so everyone would know when I come and

go.

I moved some books from my computer chair to my bed. Those weren't there when I left this morning. I made a note to look at them, but my stomach was rotting from the thought of what they could contain. I woke up my computer and checked my social media to make sure nobody had spoken to me, keeping my mind off it. Then I put on a video.

I drummed my fingers on my desk. I didn't realize that I was leaning over very slowly until my ponytail fell into my face. I flicked it back over my shoulder with an annoyed sigh and grabbed the bag of salt and vinegar chips in my snack drawer. After a while of doing nothing online, the sun was getting low in the sky, and Mommy was knocking on my door.

"Morgan, it's time for dinner," she said.

"Oh, thanks! What is it?" I said pleasantly as I turned my monitor off and spun my chair around.

She opened the door, and, seeing the untouched books on my bed, she sighed. "You didn't even look at those, did you?"

"I did," I mumbled, grabbing the one on the top of the pile and skimming the title so I could read it off to her. "Overcoming Introversion."

She stared at me. I could tell she had practically felt the confidence fading from my voice with each word. I couldn't meet her eyes, so I stood up and dropped the book back onto my bed, picking up the next one.

"Making Friends With Social Anxiety."

And the next.

"Small Ways To Fight Depression."

And the next.

"Self Help 101: Eating Disorders." I sighed through my nose, the book frozen in my hand. "I don't have an eating disorder,

Mommy."

She didn't say anything at first, making a quiet noise in her throat, and shaking her head when I dropped the book.

"You eat too much junk, Morgan," she said quietly, trying to muffle the seethe in her voice. "You only go outside to buy more of it, you're always on that computer, and you never talk to anyone."

"What do you think I'm doing on that computer?" I shot back. "And I do go outside."

She rolled her eyes and huffed. "You're not even trying to argue."

"I've had a long day, Mommy. I'm busy." I tried to be dismissive, because I knew this was pointless. She'd never listen to me.

"Doing what? Playing video games? Watching movies?"

"I have exams coming up, I'm studying for them." That wasn't really a lie. I studied all day at school.

She huffed again and made some comment that I didn't catch, ending the conversation. She told me to clean myself up for dinner and left, almost slamming my door.

I stared at the books for a long time. I wouldn't have moved for ages if I wasn't so hungry. I shoved the books under my bed and went to the bathroom to wash my hands. On the backdrop of green and yellow flowers, my round face and amber skin looked kind of nice. Out of place, as usual. But kind of nice.

I lazily brushed my hair and put it back into a ponytail, but it didn't do much. There was nothing I could do about my bushy eyebrows or more than fuzzy upper lip. There was nothing I could do about a lot of me.

Walking downstairs to the dining room felt a lot harder than usual. I wished I could eat dinner in my room, but Pa was

backing Mommy in terms of being adamant about us acting like a family. The doors and windows were closed, though. Who was the show for?

Trace was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, playing a game on his phone. Mommy was talking about work to Pa in the kitchen while he took out all the dishes. I hurried in to help, but he said he was fine and that I should wait at the table. I tried to ignore the look Mommy gave me as I slunk into the living room. The television was off and it felt like an awkward guest, watching me across the table from where I had curled myself in my big green chair. The lamp was on behind me, the light doing its best to illuminate the room. I ran my fingers idly through my thick, unruly hair, scrolling through recent texts. Nervousness made my chest feel tight and my mouth water.

I still hadn't been told what was for dinner. I hadn't noticed when I was in the kitchen, but I could smell beets, buttery potatoes, and pork. It wasn't long until Mommy walked in with her plate, stomping a little more than usual. Pa called Trace and I in for ours, then he served himself, and we all sat around the coffee table. Mommy and Pa were on the couch on my left, and Trace was on the floor to my right. Dinner was just what I thought it would be: mashed potatoes with beets and pork chops.

Pa asked Trace how his day was.

He looked up from his plate, which he was only picking over, and smiled. "Great, actually! We went to Subway at lunch, and I don't have anything due for my classes."

"Did you spill your drink on yourself?" I asked, poking his shoulder with my foot.

He stuck his tongue out at me. "That was one time."

"Oh, don't fight," Mommy snapped.

We were both stunned. Trace started to say something about how we weren't fighting, but Pa cleared his throat and asked me how my day had been. He was light and hollow, like he had to walk slightly above a floor covered in eggshells instead of simply tiptoeing around them. Just as he always was.

"It was okay. I got some studying done," I said, stabbing a beet with my fork.

"Exams are in a few days, right?" Pa asked.

I nodded.

Pa asked Trace if he was studying.

He shoveled potatoes into his mouth, pretending to be really into dinner. He seemed to have forgotten that he doesn't have exams yet.

"At least Morgan knows what's up," he joked awkwardly, then asked if I'm excited for summer.

Before I could answer, Mommy blurted, "I got a call from your therapist today. You're going to a summer camp."

I blinked, halfway through taking a bite of the beet. She couldn't be talking to me, but Trace didn't have a therapist. Only I did. I swallowed uncomfortably and mumbled, "What?"

"She'll talk to you about it later," Mommy said nonchalantly, like she didn't just drop that on me.

While Mommy was ignoring us for her dinner, Trace gave me a look, and we both rushed through our food and excused ourselves. Mommy gave me her plate to put away, even though Trace offered to take it first, then made a rude comment about how I didn't take Pa's plate as well, but my hands were full. Pa gave me a sorry look as I hurried out to the kitchen and back for his plate, avoiding Mommy's eyes.

"I'm gonna take a walk," Trace said loudly, shoving his feet into his beat-up sneakers. "Are you coming, Morgan?"

"Sure," I said, trying to be cheery. I put my shoes on and we were out too fast to be stopped or questioned.

Trace locked the door behind himself and hopped down the little step, then dashed across the lawn to the curb, where he bounced on his toes as he waited for me. I walked after him, calmer, but seeing him so happy filled me with energy. I raced him to the end of the block, across the big road, and into the woods beyond.

They were hardly woods, really just a strip of forest between our neighborhood and the complex near the school. Things happened in these woods, though. Sometimes there were raccoons, foxes, even deer. No wolves, though. Not like our last place.

We stalked along the treeline, watching for the path we always took that led to a little clearing that often had firewood in it. The teens in the area got drunk here pretty often, and made bonfires in summer. We didn't do any of that, but we were here so often we could recognize some of the worst offenders. This sneaking got Trace beat up earlier this year, but not me. I'm good at staying hidden. He's a fast learner, but he is a twelve year old boy. I don't expect him to not make mistakes. Besides, this is kind of in my nature now.

He found the entrance before I did, so I followed him down the slight slope and loped down after him casually as he hopped around the charred wood.

"So what's Mommy's problem with you lately?"

"Nothing more than usual," I mumbled, sitting down on a smooth log.

"It is, though. She's not this hostile normally, just…"

"Disappointed."

"She's a lot meaner about it now."

I sighed. "Yeah… I don't like this stuff with her talking to my therapist either. I told Suzanne not to speak to her without informing me first."

"Could be fake, then," he said as he tossed a stick deep into the woods. We listened to the way it crashed into the undergrowth as it fell.

"She likes to lie to me about plans when there's nobody else listening. This is a little bold of her."

Trace was quiet, kicking a piece of blackened wood around. I liked the way it left smudges on his sneakers.

"Could you cover for me if I stayed out here tonight?"

He looked at me worriedly for a second, but nodded. "You'll call me if you need anything, right?"

I nodded.

"And if your phone dies—"

"I'll throw rocks at your window," I finished his sentence and he smiled.

It could've grown into a grin if not for a sudden ding that made me jump. It took me a moment to realize it was my phone, and my heart nearly jumped into my mouth. I fished it from my pocket clumsily. It was Suzanne. The wind cut right through me.

Trace walked over slowly and squeezed my shoulder. "I'll be home. If I'm out of my room, I'll put something up in my window."

I put my hand on top of his and smiled up at him, feeling cold and warm in my stomach, like the moments before puking. "Thanks. I'll see you in the morning."

He was gone in a flash. I wanted to curl up in a pile of leaves and sleep forever. It was so hard for me to move. It took me a very long time to open my phone and read the message:

Suzanne: Hi Morgan, Suzanne here. Your mother called me earlier today and I have some interesting news. It's not official yet, but I think you'd like it. There's a summer camp I really want you to go to. We'll talk more in person. See you Saturday.

I let out a shaky breath. I trusted Suzanne more than Mommy, so if she said it wasn't official yet, I still have a window to jump out of.

Bad way to put it.

There was another ding, and:

Suzanne: Also, sorry for not getting to you about our last talk. I've been swamped, haha. I trust you still have your brother to talk to, and even your father if you've got to, but I'll try to be more reliable if this happens again. How are you feeling today?

The rest of the air left my lungs and I had to yawn to breathe normally again. I typed a response.

Morgan: Good to hear from you! I'm doing okay. My mother did something I didn't like, but I'm just going to put it behind me as much as I can. It's only two days until I can see you anyway. I hope you're not too bogged down. How have you been? Or should we keep it til we see each other?

Suzanne: I've been tangled up in things, but the waters are clearing.

I smiled.

Morgan: How's that girl you met at the bar? Did she ever call you back?

Suzanne: Oh, you remembered! She didn't bite, unfortunately. I'm not too caught up on it.

Morgan: There's plenty of fish in the sea, anyway.

It took her several minutes to get back to me.

Suzanne: Alright, smarty. You beat me. See you Saturday. Text me if you need anything, and call if it's urgent.

Morgan: Glad I took the bait, then. I'll get in touch if I need to, I promise. Thank you, Suzanne.

I read over the texts for a long time before putting my phone away so it wouldn't die. Suzanne wasn't really supposed to be texting me about personal things, but we were friends before she was my therapist. We met at a workshop my school sent me to, when she was first in university. When I found out she'd be my therapist, we just used her personal phone to talk instead of her work phone. It was definitely unprofessional, and maybe a little illegal, but there was not a single other therapist who would be better for me.

The air was already getting a little colder as the sun set. I figured there was no point in wasting time. I got up and took a right, deeper into the woods, away from the houses and in the opposite direction of the highway. It did not take me long to learn that going toward the highway was a bad idea, even though the woods were thicker there. I found the small rock that I had marked with blue paint and shoved it aside, sweeping away some dirt and bugs to get at my box. I put my phone and keys in it first, then my clothes. Then I buried it all again.

It started like falling asleep. I had to think about it happening for it to happen. This time didn't take very long at all, and before I knew it, my body felt like a river. Muscle and bone and blood and skin all twisted into new, more correct positions. I collapsed, a soft gasp escaping my lips and turning into a whine. It felt like starlight looks, and the only pain I felt was more like someone telling me I should be in pain. When it was all over, though, I felt perfect. I felt beautiful. I felt like I belonged.

Chapter Three (Ronnie)

Mr. Poll had emailed me a few days after, asking me why I wasn't going to school, and telling me there was a summer camp he'd found that seemed interesting. He left me a link to the website, so I spent the day curled up in bed, reading about it on my laptop.

My room was small and cozy, with big, thick curtains that had glitzy early 2000s style seascapes on them. My bed and my desk were the only pieces of furniture in my room, but I had a fairly sizeable closet full of clothes. There were boxes of things like hats, stuffed toys, and old video games under my bed. My bed itself was small, just big enough for me. I had a couple heavy duvets, but they were old and had scrap fabric sewn on in places. My pillowcase matched my laptop case; an array of roses, bursting from the two-dimensional space. I washed my pillowcase so often, because I drool in my sleep, that the colors had faded, but it still made me happy.

My desk was completely unlike my bare bed. All of my little trinkets and the things I most often used were right there, overflowing onto the space I tried to leave clear for my laptop. It was mostly stuff I'd made a year ago, when my stepdad at the time bought me a bunch of clay and modeling tools and I got really into that. Lots of dolphins and some colorful fish, poised

in seaweed. I never attempted a flower, though I wanted to. He made fun of me for what I made, so I hid a lot of it, and some of them got chipped from being stuck in a box for a few months, but now they're all out and have a home. There was a stack of books: a few comics, a poetry book, a book about gardening, and lots of detective books. I don't really read anymore, but I like them all too much to get rid of. I had a bunch of thrift store trinkets too, including a very pretty blue and green mug, a plastic apple, and a weird looking rabbit figurine. There were school papers, too, and on top of those was a little blue box with purple flowers painted on. My snack box. The trash bin was under the desk, on the side my legs didn't go on. It was a good system, despite what a lot of my stepdads had said.

Thinking about my room that hard was making me zone out. Things moved at the edge of my vision. I must be really tired. I closed my eyes for a little too long and felt myself slipping into a nap, my mind wandering to all the things I could do once summer starts next week when I finish all my exams… Hanging out here and reading, mostly. Playing video games. Going on walks at night and taking pictures of things, people, places. Spending hours window shopping online. Listening to music. Sleeping in my warm, comfy bed…

The realization that I wouldn't be sleeping in my warm, comfy bed zapped me back into consciousness. I found my place on the page in a nearly panicked rush, the weight of the words really sinking in.

I'd be gone until the fourth of August if I submitted the request, Mr. Poll had said. I'd have an escape, a hiding place, some time to process and to regroup before coming back to finish school in the fall. I'd be away from my room, my books, my ridiculous thrift store treasures and my ugly curtains, the

woods, the midnight suburbs, Mom, Cherry. Everything I cared about even slightly. I scrolled to the bottom of the page to see the dull red SUBMIT button, then back up.

My room would stay still without me, which is better than it getting dirty and having to clean it over and over. The neighborhood wouldn't even notice me leaving; they hardly know I'm here in the first place. Mom would miss me, but she wouldn't be that lonely. She's been going on dates again. And Cherry? She went five years without talking to me. She can hold her breath.

I wondered if I could too as I filled out the form in silence, paying too much attention to the sound of my fingers on the keys. Most of the questions were what I thought they would be, stuff about where I live, where I go to school, how I do in social situations, why I'm applying, what I want to do with my life, stuff about my gender and pronouns. Even though I kind of expected the last bit, I still appreciated it. Maybe a bit too much, considering it didn't matter that much to me personally. After I filled out the rest of the run of the mill info, I found myself stumped by a few questions.

The form asked me why I'm special. It asked me why I'm different from my peers, what they do about that, and what I do about it.

I blinked hard a couple times, breathing very quietly, like someone was watching me. The twinge of hunger in my tongue and throat made me feel sick. Great timing, Ronnie.

Feeling bad about myself, I closed my laptop with a sigh and slunk downstairs, my feet lingering on the steps and my palm squeaking on the railing. It was cooler down here and it made me feel sickeningly warm. My room was always so hot.

"Are you feeling okay?" Mom's voice startled me. I couldn't

see her, but looking out into the dark living room, I knew she was there.

"Just warm," I mumbled, trying not to sulk too much on my way to the kitchen.

As a little black spider crept along the counter toward the fridge, her voice sounded again, "A cold shower would make you feel better."

I smiled a little, but it was fake, and my fangs felt far too large under my lip. I knew they weren't, I was just hungry, but it made me uncomfortable nonetheless.

"Is there something else bothering you?"

I shook my head, then said no as well, not sure if she could see me that well. Eight eyes doesn't have the same effect as four eyes.

Guilt pooled in my stomach, but it was too late to take the words back. I didn't want to have this conversation again, anyway. I just opened the fridge and watched the arching legs of the spider's shadow retreat along the counter. I made myself a sandwich, then went upstairs for some cooled blood to use as a condiment. In the stuffy laundry room, I figured I could eat it here and feel sorry for myself, or I could go back and face whatever that website was implying, so I stood alone and ate.

Needing to think for a while longer, I went back to the kitchen and decided to clean up. I took my time with the dishes, washing the pot and bowls from last night too. I put away the dishes that had finished drying and wiped down the counter, careful not to sweep the little spider away, who was still creeping about.

"You don't need to be doing all that," Mom said, but she was obviously grateful.

"Don't worry about it, I like helping," I said with a smile. She always needed a hand when she was like this. I wanted to ask

what was on her mind, but I didn't want to pry. It was almost always about the guys she dates and hearing about them put me in a bad mood. I was feeling on edge already, so I didn't need more to worry about.

The sun was going down when I got back upstairs, but I couldn't open my curtains yet. I badly wanted to go for a walk, but it would be safer for me to sleep, so I shut my door and put my laptop on my desk to charge for the night. Popping it open to turn it off, the website stared me in the face.

Then, no longer hungry, I thought, why would those questions be directed at me specifically? They were probably just screening for leadership skills or something. I sighed softly, then deeply, feeling stupid. I sat down in my swivel chair and wrote out a response before I went to sleep.

I dreamed of running through the woods at night, mosquitoes landing on me but not biting, legs burning from stinging nettle and slick with mud. There was someone beside me, then there wasn't. There was screaming, terrible screaming, then it was so quiet all of a sudden. I felt cold all over and the forest floor opened up, a big fuzzy mouth with twisted and rotting teeth. I was gone before I woke up, swallowed by blackness. I remained in the mouth of the woods when my eyes snapped open to my dark room until I noticed the slow pulsing green light on my laptop, telling me it was charging, telling me everything was fine.

Everything was normal.

Chapter Four (Morgan)

The first thing I did, like usual, was scent mark the rock. Then the forest opened up to me like a movie, everything brighter, and more pleasant on my ears and nose. It was much more smooth and accessible to me, like I wasn't just watching anymore, I was acting. I was writing my own script.

It had been days since I last came down to the woods, and I already missed them dearly. The summer heat was coming on already, and even though I liked winter better, I always got restless in the summer. Without school, I could do this all day, every day. Mommy would just love that, I'm sure.

I scouted the woods until dusk, when the regular group of teenagers from our neighborhood came down to the fire pit with their strong-smelling drinks and their loud voices. I paced back and forth, sheltered by the dip in the land and the thickness of the trees. There weren't many of them, but they seemed more aggressive than usual. I slunk back into the trees, wanting to scare them but knowing I couldn't show myself. It made me angry when people were disrespectful to my forest, but I had to keep calm. I pressed my belly flat against the earth and leaves, breathing quietly into my paws.

One of the kids got closer, talking loudly at his friend trailing behind him. He was still about a dozen feet away, but I was so

overwhelmed by the smell of booze and smoke that I whined softly and shuffled backward.

"What was that?" came the softer, more melancholy voice of the second boy.

There was no reply. I opened my eyes and flattened my ears very slowly. He was staring at me, a rifle, a witness. His mouth was slightly open and he was spilling his drink. The vile liquid burned my nose as it crept through the leaves. It was an evil snake.

Deep in my chest, I was remembering how to bite, how it feels to sink my teeth into flesh.

I am not Eve.

An explosive growl made the boy throw his bottle, but he missed me completely. He fell back on his ass and his friend gasped, jumping. I did not stay around to see myself get killed. My paws have never before carried me that fast. Before I knew it, I smelled gasoline and tar. I was at the highway, where the forest floor rose to meet the road. Nerves made me pace and I wondered if I had it in me to go back. My body felt limitless, bursting with energy and fear and anger, but was I too afraid? I scratched the ground, whining quietly to myself. This had never happened before. I haven't got a plan. If I stay away, they have no proof it happened. If I return, I'll be able to get an idea of what they thought I was.

Looking up at the sky through the thinning trees, I figured I could sleep with this, out here in the safe woods. But could Trace? Letting out a sigh, I galloped back, not exerting myself but making sure I got there without wasting too much time. I had to catch my breath this time, so I made sure to hang back even more than necessary.

They stuck out from the green in their bright colors. Ven-

omous snakes in my forest. There were four, two sitting and two standing. The boys were nervous. I could tell from their voices. The girls were not.

"… not in this area," one of them said, laughing with her friend.

"Didn't one of the neighbors over there get a big German Shepherd or something recently?" the other girl added, waving her hand in most directions.

"It didn't sound like a dog, it sounded like a demon," said the more brash of the boys, while his timid friend sighed.

"So was it a wolf or was it Satan?" the second girl snorted.

"Please, you've just had too much to drink. Go home," the first girl said, standing and offering a hand to the boy. He swatted it away, making the other girl sit up pin straight.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Go home, dude," the shier boy grabbed his friend by the arm, walking him up the rise and out of the woods. The sitting girl tended to her friend and they walked each other out a little later.

Ears up and trembling, I followed them to the mouth of the forest, watching them go. It was dark and their car, lights still on, was facing away from me. They had no proof of my existence, so I was still safe. Trace was still safe.

It didn't take me long to return to my box and change back into human clothes. After burying everything again, I paced around the fire pit with my head down. I made a note of every piece of garbage left behind, then gathered it all up carefully. Our community trash bins weren't too far away, so I just hung around for a while and stayed in the shadows along the treeline, trying to track where the group went by smell and sound, but there were no signs of them anywhere. They were probably long gone by now.

I walked between houses with my arms full of crinkly garbage. The air was cool, but it wouldn't last. It carried smells of lavender, and chlorine from the nearby pool, offering a bit of relief from the sharp booze and aluminum. When I got to the bins, I sorted through the garbage in my hands, as well as some things that had just been tossed on the ground, making sure everything was in the proper place.

My nervous pace could have marched me right past my house if I wasn't so familiar with the route. The bins were along the same path as the corner store, just the opposite turn. Seeing the neon lights flooded me with an embarrassing amount of comfort. I followed the path up the road to my house, but my feet got heavier with each step.

What was waiting for me inside that door? I didn't want to find out.

It occurred to me about a foot away from my door that I could turn back and run away. I could get on several buses until I'm far away from the city, then I could just vanish. Nobody would know.

I would, though. I'd know Trace would look for me. Suzanne too. I dug my nails into my palms and stepped back, feeling bubbles of anger coming on. My teeth hurt! Thoughts I never wanted to think were bursting in my mind and my chest. My hands, my arms, my legs…

The door opened with a soft creak, and an even softer voice called, "Morgan?"

Everything left me with a breath that came from my whole body. I felt weak. I closed the gap between us and pushed the door open. My initial roughness scared him so I slowed down. He closed the door and locked it, leaning against it, fiddling with the hem of his pajama shirt. The pink and yellow one I

bought him for his birthday. He thanked me with a little dip of his head, and I smiled, tight around my ugly teeth.

He picked a burr out of my hair before dashing to the kitchen on silent feet. He's so good at sneaking around indoors, which made me sad instead of proud tonight. I watched him pour me a glass of water before I did my best not to sulk over to him, taking it and putting the jug away for him.

"Thank you," I whispered, after I had downed most of it in one go. "Why are you up so late?"

He pulled at his shirt a bit. I put my drink down and tapped my chest lightly, but he shook his head. I flicked some stray hair over my shoulder and put both of my hands against my temples, curling my index fingers like little horns. He tried his best not to smile, which made me smile, which made him smile.

"Not Mommy. Just nightmares."

I nodded, holding my hand out to him.

He took it, then leaned a little closer, so I hugged him. Whispering in his ear, I said, "Lighten up, nerd."

He laughed softly into my shoulder.

We stayed like that for several minutes. I felt myself falling asleep, anger no more than a memory of a dream.

I pushed him off me gently when he yawned, telling him he should get some rest.

He nodded, eyes droopy, so I walked him upstairs. I waited til I heard his blankets rustle before I went to the washroom to clean myself up, toweling down with water from the sink instead of showering this late. I'd never hear the end of that. I brushed my teeth a couple times over to really rid myself of the smell of the alcohol, then I slipped into bed. Not once did I look at my reflection.

Chapter Five (Ronnie)

The day after exams ended, I got an email from the people who were running the camp. It took me four hours to open it, which I spent in bed playing old games on my laptop until it overheated so badly I had to ice my lap. When I finally got around to reading it, I wasn't sure whether to be excited or disappointed. I was accepted, and was to be ready for noon in about a week from now, on the fourth of July.

I felt myself get cold. Colder, more like. I shuffled off the bed and opened the door a crack.

"Mom?" I called down the stairs.

Her voice came drifting back up, "I got the email, dear."

There was some kind of stone in my belly, eating its way through me in every direction. I didn't feel bad, but I didn't feel good.

"I think you'll do well there," she said, walking up the stairs. "You could use some new friends. A change of scenery would be nice too, you've been so restless lately and you still won't let me take you to a doctor…"

"You know why," I said with a soft sigh. It was her rule in the first place.

Her eyes flashed. She made a noise in the back of her throat that she only makes when she's going to cry.

I opened my mouth to say something, but closed it.

"I'm glad you're talking to Cherry again. You should try to find the numbers of those other kids you stopped talking to, too. Or maybe talk to your classmates on Facebook," she was picking at her nails while she rambled. I'd never seen her do that. "You used to like nature so much too. What happened to that? Ronnie, I miss you. You'll be so happy there. You'll be out making friends and exploring the woods and being on your own…"

I let her trail off before trying to ask her what she was upset about.

Her whole face sharpened and I felt like I should turn into a mouse. It took her a moment to speak. In that time, the air in the hallway turned to poison gas and I could hear the wind outside my bedroom window.

"Can I not express my happiness and concern for you? My son. Am I not allowed to be in your life anymore? Are you too old to love your mom anymore?"

I leaned back, feeling my cheeks get warmer and my chest crumple. I looked down at the floor and couldn't look back up again, only flinching and regretting it so much when she asked me why I can't even look her in the eyes anymore.

"I have better things to be doing, anyway," she snapped, turning around aggressively. She was still berating me as she stalked off down the stairs, about how I only had so much time left to suck her dry, and how she had someone new who really cared about her.

I was frozen. I stood there for so long, my feet ached and my vision blurred. When I thought it was safe, after not hearing anything at all for quite some time, I closed my door so carefully as to not make any noise. I didn't want to make that come back.

She had never done that before. No, that's not true, she snapped at me like that when I stopped talking to Cherry, before she knew why I chose to. But other than that, she's never done much more than sigh at me disappointedly. What did I even do to upset her that badly? She's never gotten mad out of nowhere.

My whole body shook so hard I felt like I wasn't shaking at all. It occurred to me as I slid my feet over my floor to my bed, trying not to make a sound, that I could just turn into a mouse for real and run away. I lowered my body onto my bed and just broke down, sobbing into my pillow and hugging my knees to my chest like I'd break apart if I didn't. I wanted to get out of my head, but whenever I tried to just focus on my heartbeat, my blankets, the wind, the sounds of my house breathing, all I could hear was her voice.

When the wind stopped raging, and I could breathe almost steadily enough to hear more than the rush of blood in my ears, I wondered if she really thought I didn't care about her.

I sat up, crossing my legs and wrapping my arms around my stomach. I wanted to do something, to end this scene, to restart. I didn't feel allowed. If I left my room I was sure she'd come storming at me again. It was almost funny; I planned on seeing Cherry today and asking how her exams went. I couldn't find it in me to laugh. I just felt so hated.

I wanted a way out.

The wind was blowing outside my window again, but this time, only faintly.

My chest felt unbearably tight and I jumped when my phone rang. Clamping my hands on the speaker to muffle it, I saw it was Cherry, and I started crying again. Thankfully not sobbing.

I picked up with a soft, "Hey?"

"Hey," she said, seeming wary. That was fair. We hadn't

spoken since the porch. "Are you okay?"

Oh, that's why. "Yeah, just… Stressed, you know?"

She made a warm sound of understanding. That hadn't changed. It almost made me cry harder, realizing how much I'd missed her.

"So how did your exams go? Are you finished?"

"I am! I only had two this semester. They were the worst, though, English and Anthro. What about you?"

I shrugged, then felt stupid, and told her about my exams. Talking quietly enough to be unheard by Mom but loud enough to be appreciated made me feel sneaky, almost in a good way. The knot in my chest was coming undone as we came to talking about her family's sandwich shop, and how much she misses swimming.

"We don't have money for a new swimsuit," she said, "so I haven't been to a pool in like two years. It's so sad. I used to be so good at swimming too, remember?"

"We only swam once together," I said, pausing when I heard footsteps. They were coming up the stairs.

"You okay, Ronnie?"

"Yeah, just… Just a second."

"Okay…" She sounded worried.

I put the phone in my lap and carefully pushed my thumb against the speaker so nothing would come out. I practically held my breath, listening to the footsteps ascend and pace for a whole minute. A whole minute! My heart was in my throat and I was sweating. I don't sweat that much, unless I'm in the sun. I swung around to check if my curtains had somehow opened, and the sudden movement sent my phone clattering to the ground.

"Oh no," I hissed, gracefully falling off the bed and dropping

to the ground, my heart beating over the sound of footsteps coming so close. Oh no oh no. It wasn't broken, but Cherry was talking.

All I could hear was a faint, tinny, "Are you okay? What was that? Ronnie?"

Mom knocked at the door and called my name. In my panicked state, I couldn't read her tone.

"Yes, Mom?" I called back shakily.

The door opened, slower than I thought it would. I flinched and snapped my arms up to my chest. I was sure Cherry could hear my heart pounding through my phone. Mom took a couple steps into my room, looking confusedly at me crouching on the ground. I couldn't meet her eyes. I'd hate for her to see how scared I was.

"Look at me, my son," she said, soft but stern, or stern but soft.

I did.

She immediately started crying.

"Oh," I mouthed.

"I… I'll text you later," I heard Cherry say before the hanging-up beep.

Mom walked herself to my bed, where she sat and told me to come sit with her between sobs. This was real crying, and that was scarier than her anger. I'd seen her fake cry once before, while a manipulative ex was leaving her. She stopped as soon as his car was five minutes away, just so she'd be ready if he stormed back in. It was overwhelming for me at seven years old, I held her and cried too, wondering why everyone always left us. It messed me up for a few weeks when she just snapped out of it, laughed, and told me it was a relief to see him finally leave. She took me and my best friend, at the time, to McDonald's to

celebrate. I cried myself to sleep when we got home.

"I'm sorry, my son," Mom mumbled through tears, trying to dry her face without getting her sleeves wet. She was wearing one of those kinda fuzzy shirts, like velvet or something, so I couldn't blame her. She seemed so small with the sobs making her shake. I couldn't look at her, but I wasn't scared anymore.

"It's okay," I whispered.

"No, no, it's not." She put her hand on my shoulder. I leaned into her touch. "I'm just going to miss you so much more now."

The words were coming out of my mouth before I could stop them. "I'm right here, Mom, why do you miss me?"

She paused for long enough that when her hand became stiffer I feared something that would've never crossed my mind if she hadn't yelled at me. I was too bold, I should've thought, I should've just apologized for angering her and told her I wouldn't go to the camp, she could save her half of the payment and we could go to Sudbury to see the Big Nickel like she wanted to, and the school wouldn't have to worry about funneling money into a useless, unsuccessful slob like myself.

"I just hope you'll be okay." She sounded defeated.

Had I said all that out loud?

Then she continued, "It'll be quiet with the house to myself, but I suppose I could find company. I'll take after you," she tried to throw a smile in but she just looked weak and… And old. "You're growing up and branching out. I should revisit my branches, like you."

I raised my eyebrows. "What do you mean?" My voice trembled a lot more than I wanted it too.

She sighed shakily, then took a moment to clean up her face and steady her breathing. Her body still shook all over. I carefully put my arm around her shoulders, shrugging hers

off mine. She let me.

"I still have the phone book from our last house, I can dig up some old friends, I'm sure."

She could not go back to those people. "What about, uh," I frantically searched for a name, "that guy you've been seeing?"

"Oh, him," she said dismissively. I knew that tone. My heart soared and I almost forgot how venomous her voice had been not two hours ago.

"Didn't he invite you out for coffee?"

She smiled, like nothing had happened at all, and got up. "Yes. This weekend, actually. The day before you leave." She left that point in the air, uncomfortable for me, but seemingly inconsequential to her.

Had it just slipped her mind that she'd lost her temper? It made me sickly happy to remember all the signs of her falling for another random low life. At least he was new. Maybe that could mean he was different.

I watched her go, agreeing to tidy up the dishes after she makes dinner. Like everything was normal.

I grabbed my phone off the floor, where I had left it when Mom ushered me to sit. Cherry had texted me, asking if I was okay and if I needed anything. I flopped back onto my bed, feeling so small and wanting nothing more than to vanish into thin air.

I told Cherry I was fine, and sorry, briefly explaining the situation. She sent me a whole lot of heart emojis, which made me blush a little. She told me she's always here for me, even after the split.

My heart hurt. She's too good.

I asked if she wanted to call; she said she'd do me one better and to be ready on the porch with a jacket and my hat. I smiled

and let this roll off my shoulders. Maybe things could be okay.

Chapter Six (Morgan)

I'd gotten the email saying I was accepted into camp. Mommy was surprisingly pleasant about it. She even told us at breakfast that we would go out for ice cream, all of us, to say goodbye for the summer. She was harsh to me about looking nice for the trip out, so I had about two hours to deal with my mess, as she put it.

Locked away in the bathroom, I couldn't do much more than brush my teeth again, shower, put on extra deodorant, and try to brush my hair into something that wasn't a frizzy mess. It hardly worked, though it was easier to brush after washing it. I envied my brother for his silky hair. If he'd let it grow, it would be so pretty. He had the face for long hair, too, like Pa, but Mommy never let him grow his hair. I was so thankful that Trace liked his short hair. Mommy got in such a fight with Pa last time he tried to let his hair grow past his ears. I only got away with it because she gave up on me.

I decided to use one of my new purple scrunchies. It might make me a little more confident in my awful hair, so I wouldn't look so glum. I tried very hard not to look at my reflection, not wanting to get caught in a self destructive loop. When I decided I'd done my best with what I had in here, I went to my room. Rifling through my closet gave me few options that

Mommy wouldn't make fun of, so I put on a plain blue shirt and swimming shorts with maple leaves on them. They were the comfiest shorts I owned, and the least able to get me in trouble. They were big on me so they didn't emphasize my thighs, which Mommy hated, and they weren't plain, which made me feel prettier.

"Time to go, everyone!" she called from the front hall not five minutes later. Did my mess really take two hours to deal with?

I timed it so I was downstairs after Pa but before Trace. She'd have some nasty comment if I was the last one ready.

"Looks nice," she said offhandedly as I shoved my feet into my sneakers. There was a huge, imposing "I guess" stuck in there somewhere, though.

"Thank you, you too," I said passively. I didn't even really know what she was wearing.

Trace came barreling down the stairs, grinning from ear to ear. He was wearing his new Wolverine shirt, and I knew he was so excited for ice cream because we never have it in the house. All of the tension was relieved. Even Pa smiled, bright and real.

Pa drove us the twenty minutes to the Market downtown. Mommy told us to watch ourselves. She was probably both threatening us and warning us. There were some frightening people here sometimes, even in the middle of the day.

We parked underneath the mall, walking through it to the other side where the Market was. We had to pass a popular candy store to get to the ice cream place, so Trace was bouncing on his toes. But when we passed it, we saw it had closed, and was now some weird clothing store.

Trace made an audible noise of distaste and I laughed a little, telling him there's still the same candy store somewhere else in

the city.

"Yeah, but that mall is impossible to get home from," he whined. "There's like, one bus that takes us home and it never shows up."

"And you don't have a bus pass anyway," I added.

"You won't get one either, not til you're Morgan's age," Mommy basically snapped.

We piped down and Pa sped us up. We crossed the road to the ice cream place, beside a Beavertails. It was a very cute little place, with no inside and no seating outside that wasn't taken up by people from next door. It was painted blue and pink and had adorable little drawings in the window of the ice cream flavors they served inside.

"Tell me what you all want," Pa said, taking out a pen and paper from his pocket. He looked very tired already. I didn't blame him.

Trace started talking, but Mommy butted in, saying, "Just a vanilla cone. Oh, maybe a vanilla milkshake. Do they mix flavors? I want a vanilla and chocolate milkshake. Whatever size is biggest."

Pa had to write and scratch and rewrite as she talked, looking progressively more tired.

"I'll see what I can do," he said under his breath before asking Trace what he was going to say.

Mommy looked mad, but kept quiet. I felt a small pang of fear in my stomach.

"Can I get a grape soda and chocolate soft serve, if they have that?"

He smiled and nodded, writing it down, then shot me a look with a glow in his eyes I haven't seen in forever. That was what Trace always got when we used to go here every Saturday. It

had been three years.

I shrugged, feeling Mommy's eyes on me. If I got too much, she'd make me feel bad. If I got nothing, she'd say I ruined the outing. My stomach was really feeling awful, though.

"Why don't you try something new?" Trace saved me with his exuberance.

"Well what's new?" I smiled, listening to him list options. He stopped at random and told Pa I was getting a blue slushie. Not exactly new, but I hadn't had one in a long time.

Pa nodded, wrote it down, and went to ordering.

The happy glow faded as Mommy immediately asked me in her cold, sharp tone why I never did anything on my own, it was always up to Trace to push me. She didn't want an answer.

Trace kicked some rocks around and shuffled closer to the counter. I looked around absently for a seat.

Pa brought our ice creams back, having gotten himself a bowl of mint chip like he always does.

"Why don't you and Trace go ahead to the car? Or even look around the mall," Pa said, giving Mommy a look.

She paused a moment, going from angry to understanding to happy. I hadn't seen her happy in a long time. She agreed, showed a decent amount of affection, and took Trace away. He gave me a bewildered look over his shoulder as they crossed the road.

I waited a bit to give Pa a questioning look.

He smiled tightly and told me I deserved a little break before I left. Some time with him, like we used to be able to have. I could've cried. I smiled so big it hurt.

"What would you like to do?" he asked, eating some of his ice cream.

"It seemed Mommy has an idea for you," I quipped.

"I just have to buy her something from one of the market stalls, but we have an hour or so."

"You think Trace will survive that?"

He laughed. "I'll get him one of those Google Play cards next time I'm at Shoppers. He should forgive me."

I chuckled and walked with him across the large plaza where all the Asian shops and restaurants are. The seating here looked like storage crates that had just been left around. The trinket sellers and the produce stands were adjacent. While Pa was probably going to be roped into buying Mommy some blown glass earrings or something, I was enticed by the fresh strawberries. Pa asked if I wanted to get some. I felt the hunger being strangled back down.

"It's okay," I stuttered, looking down at my feet. "I have this already," I said, taking a sip of my slushie.

"Don't worry about it. It's not too much. Here," he said, handing me a ten, "go pick some out and eat as many as you'd like. We can walk til you're finished, then throw out the package here."

I smiled again, genuine happiness and love making it hard to get words out. I thanked him, hoping it didn't sound too bland as I walked away. He went off to buy some earrings, just like I thought. I bought a small basket of strawberries and hurried back to Pa with the change, but he told me to keep it.

"Why? I'm going to camp," I said, casually devouring the fresh, juicy berries.

"Savings. And what if you need some money on the trip?"

"I don't think $4.50 is gonna help me out in that area, but I'll put it in my piggy bank," I said, pocketing it.

He smiled and nodded. "I'll slip you some real bills when you leave. Do you need anything while we're downtown? A bathing

suit, climbing gear, a tent?"

"Oh, I won't steal the house's bug spray or polysporin… They mentioned bringing a personal first aid kit in the email, and clothes for… How was it worded… Exciting circumstances."

He laughed. "So I guess that means a new bathing suit?"

I shrugged, eating to dampen the dread.

He frowned thoughtfully. "How about we pick up what you need for the first aid kit, extra personal hygiene products, and we get a better pair of swimming shorts? Those ones don't fit too well, do they? We can get you a nice top too."

My ears felt hot and I stared at the ground. "I can't do that with Mommy, you know that… She's so cruel about that."

He sighed and put a hand on my shoulder. "It's okay. I've got a plan. I'll task her and Trace with finding your shampoo and medical supplies while we look for a rain jacket. We'll get one, but we'll also get your clothes, and I can tell Mommy to bring the car up while we pay."

I whined softly through my teeth, my hands shaking. "Thank you," I whispered. "That really means a lot to me."

"It's nothing to worry about," he said with a smile, squeezing my shoulder. "You're my daughter, aren't you? I've got to make sure you're getting the care you need."

If I had a tail in this body, it would be wagging. I wiped a tear off my cheek when he took his hand away, thanking him again in a soft voice.

We met Mommy and Trace in the mall, and drove to the department store near home to get supplies. The plan went off without a hitch. Pa bought me a black rain jacket, purple and blue swimming shorts and a pink top. He even surprised me with a blue one piece bathing suit.

When we got home, Pa gave Mommy her gift, and they went

for an evening stroll. I watched Trace play video games, perched on the edge of his bed.

"I'm gonna miss you lots."

"I know… Me too."

We were quiet for a long time. It was nice, though. We knew each other so well, and it showed then.

How well did he know me, though? Curling up on his bed, I wondered to myself if I should tell him. How could it go? Hey, little brother, your big sister got bitten by a wolf eight years ago and has never been the same since?

He squealed and scooted back in his chair at something bright and blue on the screen, then laughed ecstatically. He was so absorbed in the game he hardly noticed the awful noise the wheels on the chair made.

I had three more days to think on it. So I'd think on it.

Chapter Seven (Ronnie)

My last morning here started with the creeping feeling that Mom would get mad at me again. The opportunity to snap was being handed to her: I'm leaving and she'll miss me so she's mad because somehow it's my fault that she's been distant. Have I even been distant at all? If anything, I'm more stuck at home than usual. The thought of going out after what happened a few months ago, in that parking lot…

I got all my bags together after breakfast, which was cereal and a banana and a little glass of microwaved blood. The blood wasn't very good, it always tasted funny microwaved, but I didn't have time to heat it up in the oven. Mom quietly, not more than usual, helped me package up some bottles of blood pills.

"This won't last you very long without feeding," she said, almost worriedly, "but you know how to find your own."

"I'll be surrounded by helpless kids!"

She looked at me, the shock in her eyes bordering on laughter. Hopeful laughter.

"They'll be none the wiser," I added with a grin, letting my fangs slip over my lip.

"Ronnie!" she snorted, smacking my shoulder playfully.

I laughed, picking up a bag of clothes. "I won't, I promise,

you know I would never. I'm sure there will be, like, cows or something."

She carried a couple bags down to the front door landing with me, then we went up for the rest. She made sure I had my hat, my sunglasses, my sunscreen, and my jacket, then went over what I'd do for light clothes and swimming.

"My waterproof sunscreen, a couple blood pills beforehand, and the burn cream right after. If I get dizzy, more pills. If I throw up, don't let the staff try to take care of me."

"Right. You'll do just fine, my son."

I felt bad. She sounded so sad. I busied myself with my bags so as to not have to look at her.

"I'll call the taxi now. I love you," she said, hugging me tightly before hurrying up to get her cell phone.

I sat on the steps while she called. On the neighbor's lawn, a neighborhood cat was licking her paw.

"The taxi will be here in twenty minutes," she called down as she came back.

I opened the door, thanking her and bringing my stuff out to the step. She followed me out, staying in the shade. She saw the cat, calling her by cooing and clicking. Eventually the cat got up and walked over, waving her long gray tail in the air.

"What a pretty little thing," she whispered, crouching and petting her once she got to her feet, purring and rubbing up to her legs.

I let her sniff my hand before checking the collar for a name.

"Princess," I said cheerfully, and she made a little chirping sound.

"That's a good name," Mom said, but she sounded absent.

We pet the cat in silence for a few minutes.

"Maybe I'll get a cat," Mom said. Her voice was dry. "I'll be so

alone. The company would be nice."

My gut twisted, so I focused on Princess. I waited for more, for louder, for angrier, but she stayed quiet. I let myself relax and the cat meandered down the stairs. Mom sighed, but she said nothing more.

I didn't know why the silence was so rough, but it was. The taxi arrived, and I waved at the driver. We said our goodbyes and she told me she'd call. I told her I'd send letters, or email, depending on how much time we got to use our electronics. The email said there was WiFi, air conditioning, and hot water, and that we were allowed to bring laptops and stuff like that.

It didn't matter, though. I didn't want my last time seeing her for so long to be like this.

I packed my stuff into the car alone, then sat in the front with the driver. I told him to drop me off at Place d'Orleans, a mall and bus station nearby, and we started driving.

To keep my mind off Mom, my thoughts wandered to that night. The way the thing looked, like it was starving from the outside in, like it had been waterlogged and then left out in the sun. It was all skin and bones and dripping blood. The scream it made was so terrifying, I couldn't remember it as human.

It had to be human, right?

We hadn't called the police, though, Mom begged me not to. She yelled at Mr. Poll on the phone when he suggested it. If it had been human, she would've called someone. She watched me all night, looking over my whole body for injuries, for more than that. It hadn't hurt me. It had barely pushed me down before I…

What had Mr. Poll said?

Blank.

Mom didn't know I remembered. I could still feel the pulsing

of my heart in every part of my body if I thought about it too hard.

I was on the ground. It had pushed me down onto the concrete, towering over me. I could see the drool, silver on its lips, its jaw distended. I was terrified, I was weak and alone, I was going to die. Something in me wouldn't let me just sit there and take that, so I…

I sighed, watching my breath fog the window.

If this thing was human, I'd just shown it that there were things that go bump in the night, and it should be afraid. Part of why I stopped talking to Cherry was that she was so obsessed with the supernatural that she refused to see how horrible it could be. I'd made sure this thing had seen only the horrors. If it was human, it would probably want to vanish. I hadn't seen it since, or anything like it, so maybe it was.

I didn't know if that was a happy conclusion or not, after tasting the bile rising in my throat.

We arrived at the stop and I gave the driver a big tip. Mom had given me a ridiculous amount of money, which I guess made sense because I don't have a credit card and will be gone in the middle of the woods for a month. Distant farmland, forest, and a lake. That's what's keeping me far away from here.

The driver asked if I wanted help with my bags, and I gratefully accepted. He and I carried them to the curb where there were some benches and another kid sitting with a whole bunch of bags too. He made sure I hadn't forgotten anything before driving away.

The kid seemed terribly shy. She was sitting on top of a big suitcase and holding two smaller bags in her lap. Beside her was another suitcase, making her nearly invisible behind the pile of luggage. She was clutching the bags in her lap with one

arm, fiddling with her hair with her free hand. Her hair was poofy, and a soft shade of brown, as were her running shoes, oddly. On closer inspection, those were dress shoes. She was wearing a tailored cream suit with a bright blue dress shirt, too, which was even more off putting. Maybe I had the wrong place? Certainly she wasn't wearing that to camp.

"Hey, are you going to the Shimmering Lake Summer Camp?" she said, her voice shaky.

I tugged all my bags closer to me, sitting down on the bench. "Yeah, are you?"

She nodded. "I came so early, I thought I had something wrong," she said, laughing. "My name's Laurie. What's yours?"

"Ronnie. Nice to meet you."

"You too." She let the conversation fall flat and went back to fiddling with her hair. On closer inspection, I noticed it wasn't her hair she was playing with; she was adjusting a pair of hearing aids.

I looked at my phone for a bit, texting Mom that I'd arrived at Place. I also texted Cherry, telling her what I was doing. I hadn't had time to mention the camp yet, even though we'd spoken nearly every day since the end of school. We'd just been catching up. She told me all about the little sandwich shop her family runs out of their house, and how her younger brother can drive better than she can, and how her little sister won some goldfish at a carnival and released them all into the sewer, much to her mom's dismay.

Cherry responded immediately.

Cherry: !

Cherry: ETA 5min

I didn't know what she meant by that. It kind of concerned me, but I let it be.

In the five anxious minutes I waited, nobody else showed up, and Laurie offered no conversation. The thought crossed my mind that maybe she knew I was different and that's why she wasn't talking to me, but that was ridiculous. She was probably just nervous around strangers.

Then, a big blue pickup truck pulled up, and out hopped a lanky Black man with long dreads. He started unloading bags from the back while a girl got out the other side and opened the bed of the truck, taking out bigger bags. It was Cherry; I could tell from her denim jacket and rainbow tie dye shirt, the colors matching the beads in her hair.

I jumped up and waved, nearly dropping my phone. "Hey, Cherry!"

She looked up, smiling ecstatically. "Ronnie! Why didn't you tell me you were going?"

I stood awkwardly, not wanting to leave my things unattended but wanting to go see her. She and her brother were quick, though, and got her set up beside me on the bench. Laurie watched awkwardly, pretending not to be interested.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going?" Cherry asked again once things had settled.

"I just forgot, I guess," I mumbled, trying to push my things to the farthest end of the bench so we didn't have to sit too close.

"How could you forget? We're going away for a whole month… I'm going to miss my family," she said, watching the place on the road where her brother's car was last visible. "I'm glad to be going, though."

"It's just not all that exciting for me. I didn't have a lot of a say in it."

"Why's that?"

"Do you know Mr. Poll, the guidance dude?"

"Oh… Yeah."

I hummed, breathing through my teeth quietly and checking the time. How long had I been here again?

The next car pulled up: a big gray minivan. From it, a tall, wild haired girl climbed out and carried all her things over on her own.

Cherry put her phone in her pocket and leaned forward, making to get up. "I can help if you want."

The girl waved her hand, smiling tiredly. "It's okay, I've got it. Thank you though."

She moved fluidly when she wasn't bogged down by bags. She didn't have a lot, and she chose very carefully where to put it all, in a neat pile between the two benches. Laurie looked on in dismay as the new girl sat on the sidewalk. Her ride hadn't even honked to say goodbye, but from the slightly tinted back window I could just make out a waving hand. She saw it too, sniffled, and waved back. Then, she closed her eyes and lowered her head, not moving aside from breathing softly.

Cherry said, "Hey, my name's Cherry."

She took a second to look up. "Oh, sorry. I'm Morgan. How are you?"

She smiled pleasantly. "I'm alright, and you?"

Morgan just mumbled something before closing her eyes and putting her head down again, leaving Cherry looking deflated beside me.

Laurie leaned over a bit, waving awkwardly. "I'm Laurie, nice to meet you."

Cherry smiled at her, eyes sparkling a little. "Hey… Are you going to the camp too?"

Laurie squinted, folding her hands in her lap neatly. "I am…"

"Oh, that was a dumb question," Cherry stumbled over her

words. "We're all going. Obviously. Why else would we be here with all the luggage…"

Laurie laughed squeakily, trying to say something along the lines of not needing to worry about it.

"You look so fancy, what are you dressed up for?" Cherry asked.

"Oh, this? I just like suit jackets, they're comfy," she said awkwardly. "And they make me look nicer than other clothes. I think so anyway."

"I hope it doesn't get too dirty at camp, it's very nice."

"I've got practical clothes too, don't worry. I wanted to make a good first impression, is all," she said with a sheepish grin.

Another car pulled up, a bright red punch buggy. It had the black ladybug spots, too. Cherry intercepted my fist with hers as a short Black boy with a poofy green mohawk stepped out of the car. He was wearing clothes that were too big for him and lugging a hiking bag that was so full it could hardly stay closed. Two men helped him unload the back.

"Thank you," he called to them as they got back into the car. "Bye, Dads!"

He waved until they were out of sight, then organized his bags against the wall. Once he was satisfied with the pile, he turned and waved at us, his bright smile lighting up his baby face.

"Hi, I'm Ripley," he introduced himself jovially.

We all said our names and our hellos before he asked us if we were excited for the camp, and why we're going.

After an awkward moment, Laurie said softly, "My therapist told me to…"

Everyone mumbled vague agreement.

"I'm still excited," Laurie continued, blushing in embarrass-

ment. "I've never been to camp before."

Cherry talked about how she was just looking forward to making friends, but that she'd be eaten alive by the mosquitoes. She even told us about a boat camp she went to once, and how she really didn't like boats but she made good friends there.

"Yeah, I'm more in it for friends, too. I'd like to get out of this city, though. I never do anything," I added.

Morgan remained silent, watching us with intense yellow eyes.

"What about you, Ripley?" I asked, trying to ignore her gaze. What was off about it?

His face lit up again and he seemed to vibrate. "I'm so excited for all of it! Have you guys even heard of Shimmering Lake? It's gonna be so cool."

There was another weird pause, then the general consensus was no, nobody had heard of the place prior to this camp. Nobody had even bothered to look it up. I hadn't noticed the unfamiliarity until Ripley pointed it out.

"Well, I'd call myself an expert on the place," Ripley said, standing up a little straighter.

Before he could say anything more, a taxi pulled up. The driver stepped out to help with the passenger's bags. From the passenger's side door stepped someone who I never thought I'd see again.

He was still shorter than me, but his shoulders were broader and he looked a lot stronger than me. He still had soft, round cheeks, but his jaw got sharper, and he had a bit of fuzzy chin hair. He'd cut his hair very short, so the wild, chocolate brown curls no longer framed his face. The newest thing about him, aside from the hints of facial hair, was how he dressed. Instead of big shirts and sweaters, he was wearing a neat button down

with a floral pattern, and little Star of David earrings. He carried himself with confidence, holding his head high and smiling slightly, like he knew something I didn't.

We pretended not to look at each other as he thanked the driver and gathered his things.

Immediately, Ripley greeted him. "Hey, I'm Ripley, what's your name?"

"Barclay," he said pleasantly. His voice was deeper, too. "Nice to meet you."

Everyone introduced themselves again. I dreaded the moment his eyes skimmed over me and I mumbled my name.

"Hey, nice to see you again," he said, giving me a soft smile.

"Yeah," I choked out, trying to find an edge in his voice that wasn't there.

"I was just about to tell everybody about how amazing this camp is gonna be," Ripley said, bouncing on his toes a little bit. "Have you heard of Shimmering Lake?"

Before Barclay could answer, a huge Greyhound bus pulled up behind him. The horn honked and he practically jumped out of his skin. Anxiety was suddenly thick in the air as we all turned to watch the doors open.

Chapter Eight (Morgan)

The man who stepped off the bus was large, dressed in worn red flannel, and had thick hair, like mine but with hints of red. He seemed younger than my therapist, despite his stature. His little wire glasses took away from his big, muscular arms, and his body that looked like he could give you the best hugs, but also like all he did was plow fields and eat hearty meals. He had the woods in him, and he filled me with something I had only felt once before, years ago in the thick forest behind our old house.

He kept talking, reading our names from a clipboard. It shook me from my daze. I was hardly able to speak when he called my name, sickened by the energy that rolled off him in waves.

I felt like I should talk to somebody, anybody. Somebody I always talk to. Somebody I love. Trace? I can't worry him with this. Who else? I whipped out my phone, opening one of few text conversations.

Morgan: Hey Suzanne, I think there's something important we need to talk about.

Suzanne: What's going on? Are you okay?

Morgan: I'm fine. Nothing scary like that. Just… Can we email later? I can explain it better there.

Suzanne: Can it wait that long? The drive is very long.

I hummed softly to myself. Shifting so my phone screen wasn't visible, I typed a response.

Morgan: Can I call when we get to a stop I can wander at?

Suzanne: Sure. If you need anything, I'm here.

I tried not to smile.

Morgan: Thanks, Suzanne…I love you. How are things going, by the way?

The man cleared his throat. I shoved my phone into my sleeve. Weirdly specific instinct.

"So, everyone, we can get on the bus and out of this heat now. We'll be leaving as soon as you're all settled."

Ripley picked up his hiking bag, slinging it over his shoulder. "Alright! Who are you, by the way?"

He laughed a little. "Oh, sorry! I'm Jason. I'm one of your counselors for the summer."

Ronnie started getting his stuff together. "Where do we put our bags?" he asked uncomfortably.

Jason put the clipboard down on the ground and opened the luggage area on the side of the bus. Ronnie quickly started packing his stuff up, with Ripley beside him. Cherry, with a sheepish look in my direction, followed. I waited, watching Laurie struggle with her heaviest bag.

"Hey Laurie, need a hand?" I offered, standing up and reaching over to take it from her.

She looked shocked. "Oh, okay. Thank you," she mumbled, slowly letting me take it.

It wasn't that heavy, but I'm strong. She took her smaller bags and we walked them over together. The compartment was much, much deeper than I thought it would be. I could crawl inside, and I had to, to put my bags at the back like I wanted.

Ronnie had already gone inside, but Cherry and Ripley were

finishing up their packing. Jason was helping Barclay put his bags away, so I felt comfortable walking by him to go inside. He wouldn't look at me if he was talking to other kids. I think I'd combust if he did, though.

Laurie followed me in. She was so small compared to me, like a little kitten following me around. I liked it, but it made me feel a little silly. Somehow judged.

The inside of the bus was bigger than I thought it would be, too. The seats had that bowling alley carpet pattern, and it was air conditioned. I found a window seat in the middle, putting my carry-on bag on it to claim it before scouting the rest of the bus. Ronnie was at the back, and had pulled his blind down. He looked like he was taking a nap already. Across from him was what appeared to be the bathroom. I felt bad for him.

"Hey," I said softly, "Ronnie… Are you sleeping?"

"No, why?" He looked right up at me over his sunglasses. His pale blue eyes made me feel seasick.

"Uh, I… The bathroom is right beside you. If you want some privacy, I'd suggest moving up a bit."

He glanced at the door, then back at me. He looked comically worried, and snorted, "Oh, thanks. How many hours would I be stuck if I got comfy now?"

I smiled, and answered, "I think seven. But you could have always moved."

"Is it really that long?" squeaked Laurie from behind me.

Ronnie nodded. "It could be, at least. I'm not really sure where it is but it's more south than Toronto."

"Didn't you look it up?"

He shook his head.

I shifted, then started to walk back to my seat. Ripley hopped up the stairs and dashed down the aisle to sit across from me.

Laurie sat beside me, and Ronnie moved up to be behind us. Hoping they'd just drop it, but being prepared for anything, I took out my phone to respond to Suzanne.

Laurie, however, had other plans for me. "Where are you from?"

I looked up at her and blinked. "Uh, here?"

"Like, where in the city? What school do you go to?"

I nodded and told her, feeling a little stupid. She told me what her school was too. She went to a private school in a rich neighborhood nearly on the other side of the city.

Ronnie rustled behind me, so I turned around. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"You go to my school," he said to me, squinting behind his sunglasses.

I tilted my head up the slightest bit.

"I haven't seen you around…"

"I keep to myself. I'm outside a lot," I said stiffly.

He sucked at his teeth. "Yeah, I'm inside. I go home for lunch."

"Oh, I've seen you walking home, I think. It's neat to speak to you now." I had to choke back butterflies for this, "I have a feeling we're fairly alike."

He furrowed his brow and gave me a gruff noise of agreement.

I turned around, feeling like I'd offended him. Laurie smiled awkwardly and asked if I've ever gone camping before.

"I've slept in the woods," I answered, trying to check my phone.

"Oh, that's cool. I've never done anything like that. What's it like?"

"Cold. Leafy."

She laughed.

I opened the texting app.

She kept asking me questions. She asked what my hobbies were and we ended up talking about movies we both liked. I really would've liked to get to my text, but the conversation ended up not being too dreadful. She liked trashy horror movies and hated all the documentaries and biographical films her mother made her watch. I snorted, telling her it was better than having a mother who yelled at you for watching movies in your room all afternoon. She frowned and I figured jokes like that were only funny between Trace and I.

Before I could say more, there was a commotion at the front of the bus. Cherry hurried on and over to Ronnie, sitting beside him. Barclay took the seat beside Ripley.

Jason climbed on and my heart sank. He told everyone we're going to be leaving now.

Quickly, while Laurie was distracted, I looked down at the text I'd gotten.

Suzanne: I love you too. Things have been really good for me. I met someone while I was shopping for new carpets for my cottage… They're very charming and fun. I have a date tomorrow night too!

I smiled, holding my phone against my belly. I felt warm all over. Maybe this could be normal, still.

Chapter Nine (Ronnie)

Jason made sure we were all settled and ready to go. The doors closed and we started to move. Anxiety bubbled in my stomach as I watched the world outside slipping away.

I knew full well what I was leaving behind. All of that could wait. Mom could sort out her issues while I'm gone. Hopefully. And I wasn't leaving Cherry behind anymore. But what was I getting into? Not only did I have no idea where I was actually going, I knew two too many people here. I couldn't just pretend all month that I was someone else, especially not with Cherry here. I valued her friendship, but mostly in the context of her being the only person from my past who's in my life now. And how common is Ronnie as a name nowadays? It's an old man name. And how many Ronnies look like they've been drained of blood and slept for five minutes six years ago? Regardless, Barclay already recognized me.

My phone buzzed.

Cherry: Are you alright?

Ronnie: I know Barclay and I'm not ready to see him again.

She let out a soft, exasperated sigh.

Cherry: Are you relying on your awkward charms or are you gonna talk to him?

I glowered at her, put my phone away, and continued to sulk,

staring out the window at the buildings melting into untamed land.

We drove for a long time like this, relatively inactive, until we stopped outside a large, old farmhouse at the end of a long driveway. There was a pristine red barn surrounded by rolling pastures, dotted with cows and chickens in their fenced areas. At the foot of the driveway, near the road where we'd stopped, stood a girl and her dog. At their feet were two lines of small, stone gargoyles, like sentinels protecting the path to the farmhouse door.

Looking outside at the girl, I noticed the sun had sunk a lot lower than I thought it had. We hadn't been driving that long, right?

Jason stepped out to greet the girl. She had a long, silky red braid, and she was very plump, dressed in a green flannel and a large sunhat. She had no problem loading her own bags, so she did that while Jason talked to her. Her dog stared him down the whole time, only running back to the barn when the girl gave him a nod.

When she boarded, she was introduced as Abigail, the final camper, and sat in front of Ripley.

"We'll be making a short stop at a gas station soon," Jason said as he took his seat at the front of the bus. "If you want to buy any snacks, that's your chance."

"Will there be a place to get things near camp?" Morgan asked.

Jason looked at her and she shrank a little. "Yeah, there's a little shop not too far away, but you'll be provided for."

She nodded hurriedly, mumbling, "Of course, thank you."

When he turned around, I swore I saw her shudder. I wondered what was going on with that.

"So, now that everybody's here," Ripley piped up, "do you

wanna hear what I know about the place we're headed?"

Cherry immediately nodded.

"Great," he said, assuming this was everyone's opinion, or maybe just jumping at the opportunity to share. "Well, Shimmering Lake is a place in Silent Woods. Have you heard of that?"

Nobody answered, but he seemed to have the attention of Laurie and Morgan now too. Barclay was listening, but Abigail remained facing the front of the bus.

"That's okay, not a lot of people have. And if you did, it sometimes feels more like a dream, or a childhood memory," Ripley explained, his big, brown eyes glittering. "It's a very big, and very special place."

"Special?" Cherry inquired, leaning in.

He lowered his voice, looking around dramatically. "It's not on any maps or radars or satellite images. You can't find it. It finds you."

Several rows of seats ahead, Jason shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Morgan looked out the window, hugging her arms to her body.

Ripley went on, saying, "It's an important place, too. It's like a kind of sanctuary… It's full of strange and wonderful things."

"Are you being vague on purpose, or do you not actually know what you're talking about?" Barclay teased.

Ripley was caught off guard. He stammered for a moment, then rapped his knuckles on his thighs. "I know what I'm saying. I'm well versed in these things."

"I was just teasing you," Barclay said with a smile, but gave a genuine apology.

Ripley still looked a little sad, but forgave him. "It's okay, I'm just really proud of this. I did a lot of research on my own and

it means a lot to me."

Barclay nodded. "I understand. I won't make jokes about it again, I promise."

He smiled shyly, his eyes shining again. "Thank you."

"No worries, dude. Are you gonna keep telling us about the place? I want to know what you mean by strange and wonderful things."

"Well, where do you think all the magic went? It's not gone, and it didn't never exist. It's just a little shy now, you could say, and places like Silent Woods keep it safe."

"Magic, huh?" Abigail muttered, but I don't think anybody caught it but me.

Cherry asked him what he meant by magic. My heart sank a bit and I leaned against the window.

Ripley pursed his lips. "That's a good question, actually. Magic doesn't really describe it well. I'm talking more, like… Unexplainable stuff. Creatures, myths, cryptids."

"Like Bigfoot?" Laurie offered.

He nodded excitedly. "Like Bigfoot!"

Cherry nodded. "Okay… But what if I've seen something like that right outside my house?"

His eyes lit up. "Really? You've gotta tell me about that! But to answer your question, that's fine, and no, you don't live in Silent Woods. Sometimes things… Come and go as they please," he said, making a walking motion with his fingers. "Tell me what you saw, though!"

"It was a few years ago and I haven't seen anything like it since, but it was in the woods behind my old house," she began, looking a little embarrassed now that everyone was looking at her. "It was late, and I'd seen this thing a few times before on my own, but only from very far away. I decided to take my

friends out to look for it, only me and two others, and we were walking around in the woods pretty late. They're not really woods, more like suburban woods, you know?"

Ripley nodded, looking at her with the utmost interest and respect. He'd taken out his phone and was taking notes as she talked.

"The thing itself… It came out from the bushes, like a big dog, but nobody in the area has a dog like that. Big and brown with intense yellow eyes. I still remember those eyes, there was something… Something about them."

"Like what?" Ripley pressed.

"I don't know," she sighed. "Just something."

Ripley tried to get her to say more, but she had run out of energy. I wanted to do something to get him off her back, but he stopped after only a few more dead ends. Even if he hadn't, I wasn't sure if I could get involved. That night and the following days were what tore us apart. She was sure that thing was a werewolf, because the eyes looked too human, too aware. I remembered that clearly, but I wasn't going to say anything about it. I wasn't going to share anything with that kid. I didn't want to hear from anyone but my own paranoid brain that Mom and I aren't the only different people in the world.

We're not even that different. We're perfectly normal.

In front of me, Morgan had shoved herself as close to the window as she could get and was stiff as a board. I could see how vacant her eyes were in the reflection. What did she have to be so worked up about? It's not like her world was being turned upside down and made into some kind of fairy tale by kids who don't know the first thing about it.

Right?

I sucked at my teeth. Morgan's reaction probably meant

nothing. No, it really did mean nothing. I'm just overreacting.

I'm just seeing what I want to see. Because of course I want this. I want to be normal, to see myself in someone else. That's what everybody's been telling me, so it must be true.

Chapter Ten (Morgan)

My phone buzzed. Slowly, slowly, I looked at it.

Suzanne: How are you holding up with all this change, by the way?

I knew what she meant.

Morgan: I'm a little worried. We'll be in the woods so I'll be comfortable, but I hope nobody has a problem with my long walks.

She sent back a smiley face and something about how I'll do okay.

My hands shook as I typed.

Morgan: There's a little more we need to talk about too. I can't talk til I call.

Suzanne: Okay. Stay safe. Text before you call.

Morgan: You too, I will.

I left out a tense breath I didn't know I was holding in. Putting my phone away, I asked Laurie if she liked horses, since we passed a field of them.

She smiled a bit. "I'm a little scared of most big animals with hooves."

"Why?"

"They could step on me without even noticing."

I smiled, trying to relax. "I guess you are a little short."

She blushed and seemed the tiniest bit hurt, but said, "Well, you're so tall, it's a wonder you didn't step on me too."

I laughed a little. "I'm not that tall…"

"I'm not that short," she quipped.

"I have to bend down to look you in the eyes. You're short."

She rolled her eyes at me playfully. "I have to tilt my head up to look you in the eyes. You're tall."

I laughed, but it did make me feel self conscious. I guess I deserved it for teasing her.

We drove in silence for a while. I watched the rolling landscape while she watched a show on her phone. She took off her suit jacket and folded it very neatly across her lap. She looked really good in her shirt. I kept my eyes on the fields when she noticed me looking. I didn't want to come off as…

I ran my tongue across my teeth slowly, remembering the feeling of wanting to bite. Of biting. Of blood in my mouth. The taste of it, the wet and dirty fur, the spasm of life. I sucked on pennies for weeks after that. I had never felt so horrible and true.

I kept my eyes on the treeline, not so far away.

We drove for a while through the countryside before we reached a gas station in a small town. Aside from houses, it had a bar, a grocery store, a post office, a huge church beside an old mill, and this gas station. There was nobody around at all.

Jason told us we had about half an hour to buy whatever we wanted, and if we were going to wander, to stay nearby. Everyone filed off, and I slipped away to sit in the shadow of the gas station, facing the empty, grassy lot to the right of it. Wildflowers grew in scattered clumps, as did scrap metal. Even though I was a handful of meters away from other people, this place seemed to be a silent, untouchable pocket.

I took out my phone and texted Suzanne, asking to call.

Suzanne: Go ahead.

She picked up right away.

"Hey… Okay… This is so much."

"Start at the beginning."

I took a deep, slow breath. "There's a kid here who creeps me out. He hasn't said or done anything too weird, but his eyes… He doesn't look quite right."

She paused. "That could be anything, but keep an eye out."

"I will. But that's not all about him. He's friends with this girl who told one of the other kids a story, apparently a real story, about seeing… A big brown dog in the woods, with intense yellow eyes. She didn't say where specifically, but I can extrapolate that she's talking about my woods, because the boy lives near enough to me to go to my school."

"Did he see you too? When was this?"

"I don't know if he saw me, but she implied that he was there. She said it was a few years ago."

She made a concerned noise. "How did she talk about this? And why was the other kid asking about it?"

"They were fascinated. It seems harmless, honestly, I'm just…"

"I understand. You'll be okay. Keep to yourself and make sure nobody catches you doing anything."

"I know, I'm smart. Thank you, Suzanne…"

"Don't worry about a thing." I could hear the smile her voice. "Is there anything more?"

"The counselor here, the one who picked us up… I get a really bad feeling from him."

"What kind of bad feeling?" she asked, her voice immediately darkening.

"Nothing that bad. He's got the woods in him, if that makes

sense."

"Oh, right, of course. You scared me for a second, Morgan… Don't be too bothered by him, okay? If it's more than paranoia, you don't need to worry about anything. I promise."

"How can you be sure?"

She went quiet for a minute.

"Suzanne?"

"The place you're going to is special. Shimmering Lake is… I know it well. You won't be on your own there."

I made a sound almost like a whimper. "I wanted to ask about that, too…"

"Of course, go ahead."

"What is Silent Woods, Suzanne?"

She sighed softly, then spoke very slowly, like she had to roll the words around with her tongue before she could get them out. "Listen, Morgan… It's real. I'm sure you've been told something about it, if you're asking me. It's real, and it's safe for you. For us. I'm… I'm sorry I didn't tell you when we first talked about this camp."

I didn't know what to say. I was stunned. I trusted her, but I felt empty all of a sudden. Suzanne knew everything about me, she helped me through my transformations and never forced me deal with my sadness and anxiety alone. I guess it's not realistic to demand to know about her life, too, but didn't we talk about her home and her cottage and her social life? Why had she never mentioned this to me? Especially if this place was a sanctuary for people like me…

"Are you still there?" she said, worried.

"I… Yeah." What could I really say?

"I'm really sorry for not telling you sooner… I didn't think it would be safe, but I should've prepared you for this."

"It's okay, I understand." I didn't. "I'll keep you in the loop about all this."

"Okay," she said sadly. "Bye, Morgan."

"Bye."

I hung up quickly, my mind full of red haze. My throat hurt. My hands, too. My nails ached. All of this was too much for me. I wanted to tear something apart.

With a quick glance around me to make sure I wouldn't be seen, I slipped a little deeper into the trees.

Chapter Eleven (Ronnie)

"Great."

"Awesome."

"Fantastic."

"Just what I need."

Cherry nudged my hat, which had been blown backward off my head by a strong gust of wind, with her foot.

"Hey! You're making it worse," I said, bending down to grab it from the mud puddle. The rush made me dizzy and I nearly fell face-first into it, so I left it be.

She grabbed my shoulder. "Easy. You go sit inside, okay?"

I looked down at my hat dejectedly.

"You're getting faint already. Here, I'll walk you in."

I wanted to protest, but she ushered me onto the bus and back into my seat, patting my head. I frowned at her.

"It's my only hat, Cherry…" I tried to hide the rising panic in my voice.

She smiled, grabbing her little purse. "Don't worry about it. Do you want any snacks or drinks?"

"Gummy bears?"

"Sure," she said, and ruffled my hair. I swatted her hand away and pretended to sulk, sifting through my bag for my first aid kit.

I watched Cherry walk into the store, then kept my eyes on my things. If anyone spoke to me, I was afraid I'd cry. I especially don't need questions about why my hat was so important. Pretending to be anemic is one thing, but pretending I get a dizzying, sickening rash from the sun is a little more risky.

It hadn't hit me until this moment that I'm going to a summer camp in the middle of the woods, where I will have to be outside all day, every day, no excuses, during the daylight hours…

Grumbling to try to make this into a joke, I took one of the special pills that Mom gave me for when I got too much sun. They weren't a solution to hunger, but they helped my body heal from sun exposure and other allergies.

"Hey Ronnie," Ripley said. I hadn't even noticed he was still here; it startled me so bad I nearly dropped my pill bottle.

"What's up?" I said quickly, shoving my things back into my bag.

"Just wondering what happened to your hat…"

"Oh, it fell in the mud outside," I sighed, running my hand through my hair. I felt so naked.

"Do you have an extra one?"

I shook my head. It hurt a bit, but I could already feel the medicine working.

"That sucks… I hope it wasn't super important."

"It was," I grumbled.

"Why?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"I get headaches from the sun."

"That sucks," he repeated. "Is that why you have the glasses too?"

"Yeah. I have lots of backup glasses because they're easier to break."

He nodded. "Can I sit with you?"

I shrugged. "Until Cherry's back, I guess."

He thanked me and took her seat. "Sorry if I'm a little weird. I don't have a lot of friends so I don't know how to talk to people too well."

I closed up my bag and put it back at my feet. "Don't worry about it, you're not weird. I'm the same way anyway."

"Is that why you're here?" he asked. "I mean, my therapist recommended I go to a summer camp to make friends, so maybe yours did too…?"

I made a hand gesture for so-so. "A few things brought me here. School's hard, is one of them."

He agreed. "I'm moving to a different school in the fall, an easier one for me," he said, then got defensive suddenly. "I'm not dumb or anything, I just can't handle the environment at normal schools."

"Hey, I get you, I know you're not dumb. I'm glad you're moving schools. Hopefully it'll work out for you."

He smiled, but it was half-hearted. "Yeah… And it'll be easier in September anyway."

I raised an eyebrow questioningly.

He told me he was starting hormone replacement therapy with his doctor then, and that he'd been waiting to start testosterone all year. He said he's gonna be so much more confident in the fall, and it'll help keep his mind able to focus on school instead of how he feels about himself. His face lit up completely when I told him I was proud of him. He told me more about the treatment and I listened intently, enjoying his happiness. I knew about this all already, but suddenly I felt very protective of this boy, so I wanted to give him that support. He was a couple years younger than me and I could easily, age-wise, be his big brother. So I might as well be. For the duration of

camp, that is.

Cherry came back soon after, so Ripley stood up. She walked over and sat down beside me, holding a plastic bag.

"Hey dudes, how's it going?" she said to both of us.

"Good!" Ripley said. I could tell he was just bursting, waiting to tell Cherry about his plans, but he was polite and let her talk first.

She turned to me and tossed a package of gummy bears on my lap, then took out her drink and an iced tea she bought for me, then put the bag down on the seat. I took my iced tea from her, holding it between my knees, and she nestled her drink between her bag and the back of the seat. Then she told me to close my eyes and rifled through her bag when she wasn't looking.

"Okay, eyes open. Pick a hand."

Cautiously, I said, "Right."

She held out her empty hand, then ruffled my hair. I shoved her away, laughing.

"Okay, okay, I got you something for real," she said, pushing me back. She was much stronger than I remembered.

Ripley watched excitedly, but I had a feeling it was going to be a hat, and while I knew I needed one, I wasn't sure I wanted to move on so fast. That old one was my favorite, I'd had it for years. Since I first knew Barclay, in grade nine.

She did, in fact, take a hat out from behind her back. It was bright yellow, almost neon, with a darker yellow bill that had two little black dots on it. It had these stuffed white felt bits on the front, with black felt sewn on for pupils, like a cartoon duckling.

"Do you get it? It's a duck!" She said joyously.

I stuck my tongue out. "I get it, it's just…"

"Adorable?"

"Not the a-word I'd use, but sure."

She sighed. "Come on, don't you like it?"

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Do I?"

She pouted. "I bought it special for you, Ronnie…"

I tried to hold her pathetic stare but I burst out laughing, pulling her into a hug. She giggled and squeezed the breath out of me.

"I love it, Cherry," I mumbled into her shoulder. "Thank you."

"I'm glad," she said, leaning back.

"It's gotta be the silliest thing I own now," I said, taking it from her.

"But?"

"But it's a great hat."

Ripley leaned across the aisle and whispered not so quietly to her, "Just for the record, I think it's awesome."

I ripped the tag off and put it on. Just then, Barclay walked in with a very full bag. He stared at me. My whole face got hot and I, far too loudly, asked Ripley if he'd like to tell Cherry what he was telling me.

Barclay walked by without a comment, but I didn't stop blushing until Morgan slunk on and into her seat. She looked…

Wild.

I couldn't explain it, but something tugged in my gut, where anxiety sits. This wasn't anxiety, though. Had I felt this before?

Where the cement lapped like beach water on the sand, yes, I'd felt it. All of a sudden I couldn't breathe. I sank against the window, squeezing my knee with one hand as I fumbled with my first aid kit again for more of my medicine. I had to force it down with the iced tea, too dizzy to chew it. Cherry didn't notice that I was almost crying and I was so thankful that Ripley

didn't point it out.

This had to be nothing. It couldn't be anything but nothing. If I could just ignore this feeling, I could have a normal summer.

Chapter Twelve (Morgan)

The whole bus was looking at me. I could feel it. But when I turned around, it was just Ronnie. I shivered and felt the muscles in my head move like I was flattening my ears. That startled me, especially when I reached for them and found burrs in my hair. I picked them out, hoping Laurie didn't notice.

"What happened?" she asked. Of course she noticed.

"I fell."

"Are you okay?"

I nodded.

When I got all the burrs out, I slipped by her to throw them out in the garbage, which was in the bathroom. The bus started moving before I sat down again. I pulled out the little bag of assorted licorice Pa had hid for me. I shouldn't have smashed things in the woods. I should've just bought snacks. Like everybody else. Like a normal kid.

I looked down at myself. My body looked distorted and lumpy like yeast that wasn't stirred properly.

I can't be a normal girl.

I think Laurie asked me if I was okay, but I closed my eyes. I pretended to be taking a nap against the window until I really was. I was only half asleep at any given time. That way, I could hear everything. Ripley wasn't talking about anything

concerning, Ronnie and Cherry were chatting with him. Laurie was being quiet. Abigail hadn't said a word the whole time.

I felt very warm and sick. My head spun, my body spun. I wanted to feel the ground beneath my paws. When I felt my teeth begin to ache, really ache, I jumped awake and shoved some candy into my mouth.

Laurie laughed to herself, the kind of laugh you use for funny things on the internet. I decided to ignore it. I didn't want to glare at her, even jokingly. I didn't want to make myself more angry. And she was so fragile in that way, I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings.

I'd hardly been asleep for a few minutes, but the sun was much lower in the sky. It skirted above the trees.

"We're going to make our last stop soon," Jason said, making me jump a bit. "Before we get to camp, that is."

I debated asking Laurie how long I'd been sleeping, but I didn't want to be weird.

When the bus stopped, Jason got up and addressed us. "Since camp is only a few minutes away, this is more just to get you acquainted with the shop. You'll be allowed to come here during break times. I know the guys who run it… They're a little eccentric, but they're good people. If you want to buy some more snacks or anything like that, this will be your last chance for the next week or so."

We all got off and walked around the small, gravelly parking lot, stretching our legs. It was much later than I thought it would be, and the lake air was cool. The shop was perched right on an outcrop of land, sticking out over the lake, surrounded by trees and large stones. It almost looked like there was something to defend against, lurking in the water.

It crossed my mind again that Suzanne said she knew this

place. I tried to push the thought away, studying the little shop.

It was definitely a fishing tackle shop. It looked like a couple sheds had been pushed together and painted blue. There was a stand full of buckets of worms, and fishing rods, oars, and canoes were laying haphazardly around the area. The sign on the door was hand painted, welcoming us inside. Within the shop, not much was different: there were many displays with different types of buckets, life jackets, hats, those little glittery plastic bait fish, cleaning supplies, even magazines. There were some snacks too, at the back of the shop, and two large fridges and freezers. Each clearly advertised its contents, so that nobody tried to buy a bucket of bait as a snack.

Jason was already inside, talking to a very large man behind the counter at the front of the store. This man was the most striking part about the store. He was half a foot taller than me, if not a little more, and had a face that reminded me of a pug. He had two short, dull teeth, maybe tusks, curling over his upper lip, and his deep-set eyes were pitch black. His hair was long, in dreads, and the same color as his eyes, and his weirdly pointy ears stuck out through it. His skin was the most startling part: it looked like mossy old limestone. He was wearing a neatly ironed red polo shirt with a name tag on it, but aside from that, he looked like an orc.

It unsettled me deeply that if what Suzanne said was true, then maybe he was. But why would that be unsettling? It's safe here. For me, at least. I had no idea what all of these kids were doing here if they weren't like me. I knew for sure that this wasn't a camp specifically for us because Ripley was here. I tried not to think about it, slinking to the back of the shop to stock up on junk food.

Two girls hovered by the freezer, talking quietly. One of them

had warm, dark skin and black hair twined into a braid with a glossy purple ribbon. She had sharp, angular features and looked around with big, anxious eyes as the other girl talked. She had nearly pink skin to match her eyes, and short, clean-cut white hair, and seemed largely unaffected by whatever the first girl was scared of.

"Even if these are the people going to that camp, there's no reason for Gus to talk about that," the calm girl said.

"But what if he does, Jolly?" the other girl pleaded, grabbing her hand. "Okay, quiet down now, someone's coming."

Slipping past them to open the freezer, I weighed my options. Do I ask them what's up? No, they'd just shut the conversation down. I grabbed a juice and a carton of chocolate milk. Do I tell them we are the campers and ask who Gus is? No, that's a way to get myself in a fight. I'm not the scary, strange girl in the school full of normal kids anymore. Neither side knows who I am. I'm a perpetual outsider.

I moved on to gather chips and candy from the nearby shelves, overhearing what Jason was saying at the front.

"Yeah, we'll be here for a month. Are the two of you still gonna be around?"

"Of course," the big man said. "We don't vacation. Who'd run the shop? Besides, if we wanted some excitement, we could just watch the lake."

"What's up with the lake?"

The rest of the kids had filtered into the small space. Behind me, the anxious girl made a sharp whining noise.

"Haven't you heard?" he said with a smile, looking at the kids near the counter. "Tell me, how many islands does your lake have?"

"One," Jason answered.

"That's the thing… Up until a few months ago, there were two."

Jason coughed a bit and waved his hand dismissively. "Don't be like that, Gus."

"No, really—"

"No. Really."

Gus blinked a bit, but nodded. "Alright. Well, nice to meet you all. I'm Big Gus and this is my shop. Little Gus is in the back right now, but he runs the shop with me and lives here with me too. We're always open. You can come just to talk too."

The reception was warm but baffled. Ripley, thankfully, kept quiet. I was a bit scared he'd say something weird to this guy.

As Jason turned back to speak to him a lot more softly, I heard Jolly saying, "Well, that was something, wasn't it, Vetsey?"

Feeling suffocated by the tension on every side, I hurriedly paid for my snacks and went out for air. I met Ripley beside the bus; he was overflowing with excitement and I tried to act normal.

"Did you see that guy?" he whispered to me as I tried to pass him to go inside.

I paused, leaning against the side of the bus. "Yeah…?"

"Didn't he look like…"

I raised an eyebrow, a little too aware of my fangs. "Like what?"

"You know, like an orc! You must've seen it too. He had tusks and green skin and everything!"

I looked around uncomfortably. "Maybe it's just, uh, tattoos, or a skin condition."

He flapped his hands at his sides. "But Morgan, you heard me talking about Silent Woods," he argued plaintively. "We're here, and there's a guy who looks like an orc, so why wouldn't he be

an orc?"

I didn't want to say anything, so I just shrugged and kicked at the ground absently.

"You have no idea how excited I am to be here," he said, his voice sounding light and starry. "I used to dream about coming here, and now it's really come true and all of this is right here for me to see and study. And Cherry's story about that wolf thing… This is gonna be the best summer ever, isn't it?"

The muscles in my shoulders tightened. Something in me cracked deeply.

Across the lot, Ronnie and Cherry walked out of the shop.

"You know what?" I snarled at Ripley, unable to control it. "This summer would be a whole lot better if you stopped studying people like they're animals."

As I stormed up the steps of the bus, I knew that nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter Thirteen (Ronnie)

Once Morgan was out of sight, Ripley was crying. His body shook and he hugged himself tightly, and when he turned to see us, tears were streaming down his cheeks.

I left Cherry, hurrying over and holding out a hand. "Are you okay? What happened?"

He sniffled, briefly lifting his arm to wipe his face. "Am I creepy?"

"What? No, did she say that?"

He shrugged, looking at his feet.

Cherry caught up and looked at me, deeply worried.

I tried to busy my hands with themselves. "Let's walk around a bit and talk, okay?"

Ripley nodded. He, Cherry, and I walked around the edge of the parking lot, finding a large log dotted with pretty white and yellow mushrooms. We sat down and I asked Ripley to tell us what happened.

After he explained what happened, he said, "I was just excited about being here… I've always wanted to go to Silent Woods but I thought it was impossible. I didn't even believe we were really here for real until I saw that Gus is an orc… He's obviously an orc, right? It's just such a wonderful place, I've always dreamed of going here and it's gotta be real now, right?"

I froze up. He was being serious about this? I'd kind of hoped that whole speech on the bus was a joke or a game. That guy wasn't an orc. This is just a place in Southern Ontario. None of us had bothered looking up the lake because why would we? It's just a normal place, he's just a normal guy, it's just a normal summer camp. I didn't want to crush his spirits, but my brain seemed to short circuit whenever I tried to fabricate an argument to support his fantasy.

Cherry took over for me, putting her hand on his shoulder gently. "First of all, I think this place is cool enough as it is, and if it turns out to really be Silent Woods and Gus is an orc like you said, then that's even cooler, especially since you're clever enough to figure it out. You're not bad or weird for being this excited. I would be too, and I am… I'm just a little skeptical."

He gave her a questioning look. I was surprised, too.

"It's just a bit out there for me, you know? Like… I believe I saw something supernatural in the woods, and I'm willing to believe in this place, I just don't want to get ahead of myself and be disappointed."

"Well, if you never let yourself think it's not real, then you'll never be disappointed," he said, a hint of his usual cheekiness returning to his voice. "And it is real. I promise it is."

"What if Gus says he's not an orc, though?" Cherry asked.

"Who says he's telling the truth?"

I hummed to myself, sucking at my teeth. "That's a little… Rude."

He turned to me, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "How?"

"I mean… I bet you wouldn't be happy if somebody assumed you're something you're not, and kept insisting that you are even after you've corrected them."

His eyes widened and he got really quiet, nodding solemnly.

"But you're not creepy for that," I added. "You're not creepy or weird for your enthusiasm, either. Is that what Morgan said to you?"

He shook his head, folding his hands in his lap. "She said I should stop studying people like animals…"

"Do you?"

He shrugged. "I've got this book, but it's not about any specific people, it's about the creatures I've seen. I didn't even tell her I was gonna put Gus in it, but it wouldn't be Gus really, just what he looks like and all, same with the wolf you told me about, Cherry. I don't know why she said that."

I leaned back a bit, thinking.

"I wouldn't worry about it, okay? You're not doing anything wrong. I think it would be best to talk to her tomorrow and tell her how you feel and that you didn't mean to upset her," Cherry suggested.

He shrank, his face animatedly scared.

"Hey, don't be afraid," she said with a smile. "Ronnie and I will be close by. We won't let anything go wrong."

Relaxing, he thanked her squeakily, rubbing a tear from his eye.

"No need to thank me, okay? You're a good kid and we're not just gonna let you feel bad all alone."

I agreed, but I couldn't shake this weird feeling about Morgan. Why had she said that specifically, especially if she hadn't known about Ripley's book? Why was she so on edge about him thinking this place was actually Silent Woods? Could it have something to do with her bad reaction to Cherry's story?

As we boarded the bus again for the final short stretch, I decided that no, it couldn't.

This was gonna be a normal, simple, easy month. It had to

be.

Chapter Fourteen (Morgan)

As we drove along the edge of the lake, I could tell why they named it what they did. The surface of the water reflected the rays of sunset that bled through the forest, turning the lake to a black and red blanket of stars. In the water, I could see shapes moving, dark things the size of people. Some were even bigger.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned, getting my things together. The bus came to a clunky stop in front of a long, rickety wooden bridge that started between a cluster of smooth rocks and ended on the island's sandy beach.

Jason brought us out, and for the first time for the whole journey, I noticed the driver's cabin was empty. Did they step out before us?

We unloaded our luggage from the carriage under the dark sky. There was a large storm cloud overhead. The lake still glittered.

When we were finished and Jason made sure nothing was forgotten on the bus, it drove off. I hadn't noticed the driver getting back in.

There was a man walking up the bridge to us. His white hair glowed in the light that seemed to emanate from the lake, and it stood out even more against his dark, freckled skin.

When he was close enough, he called to us, "My name is

Shebal. I'm going to be your other counselor this summer."

Ripley waved and sleepily introduced himself.

He chuckled a bit. "You need to get to bed, it's been a long day for you. We'll have time for proper introductions in the morning. Come along the bridge now and we'll get you sorted out." He turned and started to walk back across the bridge, then looked over his shoulder and said, "Jason? Hold up the end for me, would you?"

Abigail didn't hesitate to follow Shebal onto the bridge, but the rest of us gathered in a clump on the shore.

"What are you waiting for?" Jason asked us.

"Are you sure the bridge can hold us?" Laurie asked nervously. She seemed to flinch at every small noise: the insects buzzing, the frogs chirping, the lapping of the water, the distant cry of a coyote.

Jason frowned at it. "It's an old bridge, but I think it's okay. If you're scared, though, I can walk you across in pairs or something."

Something in me didn't like that idea. I stepped onto the bridge, carrying all my bags. Laurie made a flustered little noise, looking between us, then followed me. She left some of her bags to be able to cling to my arm. Her touch made me feel warm and powerful, and I walked slowly so as to not scare her. On the other shore, we set our things down and walked back for the rest of her bags. She said nothing the whole way and didn't look at me once, but it didn't seem to be in a bad way. I kept giving her little glances to make sure she was alright.

Halfway across, we had to squeeze past Barclay, and she walked ahead of me. I didn't look away from her once for the rest of the way.

Once everyone had their things on the island's small, grainy

beach, Shebal and Jason walked us up the slow slope to the short row of cabins that we could choose from.

"Try to stick to two of them," Jason said. "There's four beds to a cabin, plus a bathroom with a shower, toilet, and sink. Each has a cooler, too, for drinks and that sort of thing. As promised, there's electricity, internet, and air conditioning, but we only turn that on when you're actually in your cabins."

The bugs were already eating at us, so we hurried to the first two cabins. Standing awkwardly as a group between the two small buildings, we didn't know how to divide ourselves. Laurie stayed with me, and Cherry drifted over after saying goodnight to Ronnie. Abigail was already going into the first cabin, so the three of us followed her. It kind of bothered me that we'd split ourselves into girls and boys even when we weren't told to, but I could just be looking into it too much. Either way, I was glad to be included.

Inside the cabin, there was one ceiling light illuminating the natural wood floors and walls. It had been cleaned recently, and the four beds were made neatly, minus blankets. Abigail had chosen the one in the left corner on the wall opposite the door and she was already setting up her blankets and pillows. There was another bed to the right of the door, and a bunk bed across from that on the other wall. Each bed had a curtain that could be pulled around for privacy, but I still opted to sleep in the single bed. Laurie took the top bunk right away.

"If anybody has something that needs to go in the cooler, pass it over and I'll put it away for you," I said, unpacking my snacks after setting up my bed.

Once everything I had put away all the things I was given, we put the basic bathroom needs in their place and got ready for bed. I was quick to close my curtain and get into bed, but I

didn't calm down enough to sleep for quite a while. I'd never shared a room with anyone, or even had a sleepover. I didn't like the idea of people seeing me sleep, and while the curtain was a comfort, the proximity to so many other people made me uncomfortable. It felt like they all knew some secret about me now.

Facing the wall, I curled into a ball and covered my head with my arms, waiting to fall asleep.

Chapter Fifteen (Ronnie)

Once the girls went into their cabin, we went into ours and the counselors walked across the grass to another slightly larger cabin. I watched them at the door for a moment, wondering why they both made me similarly uncomfortable. I took my hat and glasses off, rubbing my eyes and trying to shrug it off as just a problem with men.

I claimed the bed closest to the door, while Ripley got the bottom bunk and Barclay got the other single bed. They were too tired to set up more than their beds and a few bathroom essentials, so I didn't bother them with my unpacking until the morning, when we got until noon to get ourselves settled.

There were drawers under each bed for our clothes, and a laundry basket in the space between the beds opposite the door. I didn't know where the laundry machines were, but I assumed they were in one of the other buildings on the island. In the empty corner opposite to my bed there was a cooler, like Jason had said, and a table. We dumped all our snacks there, as well as a couple things that wouldn't fit on the small nightstands by our beds: Ripley's CD player, a dehumidifier that Barclay brought, his sharps disposal bin, and his box of needles. He put his testosterone vial in the cupboard above the sink. I debated putting my laptop on the table, but I figured it was safer beside

my nightstand.

It kind of bothered me that I had so little to set up. This didn't feel like my house. Maybe that was the point.

When we were all settled that morning, we still had a good bit of time before we were going to be called out. Ripley shared some granola bars with us for breakfast and then he took a shower, leaving Barclay and I alone.

Sitting on my bed, I pretended to be arranging my pillows. The roar of water filled the room though the thin wall.

"So, how have things been with you?" Barclay said.

My mouth felt dry. I tucked my legs under myself, trying to look at him. "Fine. You?"

"Yeah… Fine."

Silence.

"How long were you going to pretend to not know me?" he asked coyly.

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck and looking away. "I'm sorry, man…"

He shrugged. "I just kind of hoped you would've changed. It wasn't like we had a big fight or anything, we just… Stopped talking, and you never returned my calls. You didn't have to go so far as to change your number."

I blinked, shaking a bit. "My phone broke and I couldn't keep my number. I lost yours. I didn't mean to not contact you again, I just was unable to."

He seemed stiff, fiddling with his buttons. "Why were you so weird yesterday, then?"

I managed to laugh awkwardly. "Dude, I got into a fight with my best friend in middle school and we only just started talking again this year because she came and confronted me about it. Like, on my doorstep. Remember the class I switched out of in

grade nine, at the start of the second semester, right before you moved schools? Yeah, that was because of her. I'm extremely weird about this kind of thing."

He looked torn between wanting to find this funny and still being hurt. He just shrugged again and said that it maybe wasn't the smartest idea to pretend there was nothing between us if I wanted to be friends with him again. Then he got up and left.

Listening to the water run, I felt so small that I might just disappear.

When Ripely got out of the shower, he came out dressed in the same clothes he'd worn yesterday: a very large green shirt, sweatpants, and a denim vest with a studded collar.

"Where'd Barclay go?" he asked, fluffing up his hair.

I shrugged, sucking at my teeth. "How's the shower?"

"Oh, great! The hot water doesn't run out."

Soon, it was noon, and Jason called us outside. Ripley and I stepped out to find Barclay sitting by the fire pit in the center of the camp. He looked back at us and waved, smiling pleasantly. The three of us walked together to the dining hall where Jason was waiting by the door. He said hey to all of us, and to the girls who followed us in.

Inside, there were two rows of tables, just like the tables in my school's cafeteria. At the far end of the building there was a wall with a door and a serving window where I could see the kitchen. Jason sat near to that door and greeted us as we walked in. Shebal was leaning on the counter in the window, tapping his fingers together. There was a stack of plates and cups beside him.

"Jason!" he yelled. "Come help me back here, you can make friends when everyone has food."

He grumbled something about it not being his decision to

skip breakfast on the first day, but he hurried back into the kitchen.

We sat only at two tables, staying in the groups we'd slept with. The building felt big and empty with so few people in it and I wondered why there were only the seven of us here. Was there something weird going on? Or was the camp too new to be known yet?

Yeah, I'm sure that's all it was.

"What are you doing sitting?" Shebal called from the window. "Come get your breakfast."

"Lunch?" Jason said.

"Brunch?"

We walked up to the window in a haphazard group, so Shebal gestured to form a line. We did, very awkwardly. Taking a plate and a cup as we walked up, he poured us water or orange juice while Jason served us waffles and fruit salad. We returned to our seats, and when we were done eating, Jason got us to put our dishes back on the counter and then asked if one of us wanted to volunteer our help to wash them all.

"If you don't offer, we're just going to pick someone," Shebal said from behind the counter.

Laurie's hand shot up. Shebal gave her a thumbs up, then disappeared behind the wall to get the door for her.

Jason told her to wait a second, so she sat back down quickly, trying to fold herself as small as possible.

"Okay everybody," he began, fiddling with his hands idly, "I'm sure you've all talked a little and have introduced yourselves already, but we're gonna play a little game to get everyone to get to know each other. So we'll go around the room and everyone will say their name and something fun about themselves. I'll go first. I'm Jason and I, uh, I built the cabin that I live in."

There was a vaguely impressed, if not a little forced, mumble from both our tables. Laurie absently fiddled with her hearing aid and Jason called her out.

"Yeah, you can go next," he said with a tense smile, looking a little jumpy with everyone's eyes on him.

"Oh?" she said, clasping her hand to the bench. "I'm Laurie… I… I like comics…"

She glanced at Morgan, who was picking something out of her teeth.

She coughed and put her hand down, looking firmly at the table. "I'm Morgan, I would like to be a professional film critic," she rehearsed.

Cherry, from Laurie's other side, did her best to resolve the tension growing in the room. "That's really cool, Morgan," she said brightly. "I'm Cherry, you probably know that. My family runs a sandwich shop and I'm going to take it over someday."

"That's cooler than reviewing movies for a living," Morgan said, slouching a bit.

"Well, I'm being forced to take over the family farm," Abigail said from the other side of their table, stopping their discussion. "And, uh, I'm Abigail. Sorry."

"Forced?" Ripley whispered, looking over at her. When Jason's eyes fell on him, he stiffened and blurted, "I'm Ripley, I like cryptids," tapping his fists on his thighs rhythmically.

It took me a second to realize it was my turn to speak. "I'm Ronnie," I said, perhaps a little too loudly. "I'm… I take pictures…?"

It hit me that I didn't really do much. I wasn't as interested in video games as I used to be, I don't really explore the area as often as I'd like to think, I'm not into television, and I couldn't be bothered to get more clay. I just kind of take care of the house,

do my school work, and spend my summer nights working. I barely take pictures anymore because I don't get out.

My life's kind of been on standby since that night.

Barclay looked at me sadly, like he could read my thoughts. "I'm Barclay and I write poetry."

After a pause where nobody knew what to do or say, Jason cleared his throat and dismissed us after giving us awkward praise.

Shebal held the door open for Laurie, and as she walked up, he said, "So, you like comics? That's cool, tell me about that."

Jason followed her in, then said over his shoulder, "Oh, you all can do anything you'd like for about half an hour, then meet in the fire pit."

"Just stay within the campsite," Shebal added. "Don't go into the woods or the water."

The six of us ended up standing around the fire pit anyway. Abigail took a seat on one of the logs beside it, and Ripley hurried to sit beside her.

"What do you mean, you're being forced to run a farm?" he asked.

She didn't seem fazed by that at all, looking up at him and plainly saying, "My dad says I need to take the farm from him and my mom soon, since my brother went to America to live with his girlfriend, and I don't have other living siblings."

"How's that forcing?"

She smiled grimly. "You don't know my dad."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Well, maybe he doesn't know you…"

She leaned back on her hands, narrowing her eyes at him. "I'd say that's a given."

Feeling a little protective, I sat down on his other side,

pretending to be more interested in the charred logs in the fire pit. Morgan sat across from me, already poking them with a long stick.

"What do you wanna do instead?" Ripley asked cheerfully.

"Don't know that yet," Abigail answered, her tone still a little chilly.

"What do you like doing, then?" Ripley pressed.

She looked off into the sky, her wide-brimmed sun hat casting her round, freckled face in shadow. "I like helping people."

"Like a doctor? Or like a therapist? Or like one of those people who gives—"

"I like helping kids in bad situations."

"That's what this camp is for, isn't it? Why don't you work here? You look old enough. How old are you?"

She sighed heavily. "I'm turning nineteen in the fall, and I don't want to work at this camp. I don't want to be stuck here any longer than I have to be."

"Stuck here? Like, in—"

Cherry cleared her throat, coming up behind him. "Hey, Ripley? Why don't you tell me more about those corn wolves you mentioned on the bus?"

His eyes lit up as he turned around, but his worried expression returned quickly. "I'd love to, but… She wouldn't have brought that up if she didn't want to talk about it… Right, Abigail?"

But as he turned back to get her input, she'd already gotten up and was walking back to her cabin.

Cherry got Ripley to entertain us all with a story about one of the road trips he and his father had gone on. They stopped at a small motel for the night, and it was right near a large cornfield. He went out to get something from the car late at night and heard this hissing sound from the corn. At first, he thought it

was the wind, but there was no wind. It was too animal to be a sprinkler system or something like that. As scared as he'd been, he chose to look out into the corn and saw a pair of glowing green eyes.

"I felt them following me the whole way back to my room."

The four of us, who had sat in a semi-circle facing Ripley, looked up and past him as Jason and Laurie approached. Ripley's glittering eyes went still and his smile melted into anxiety. He whirled around to see them, then laughed and said hello to them.

Laurie sat down beside Morgan, and as Jason asked where Abigail was, she stepped out of her cabin and joined us.

Jason told us we would be doing a brief tour of the island, and started right away by pointing out the cabins and saying we were already familiar with those. He was moving stiffly and kept adjusting his glasses, which slowed his speech considerably. He pointed to the cabin he and Shebal had gone to last night, the large one closest to the slope that leads to the bridge, and said it was the adults' cabin. Awkwardly, he spun around and pointed at the building we ate in.

"That's, you know that, that's the dining hall," he mumbled, then pointed at the slightly smaller building to the right of it. "That's the storage building."

It looked like it hadn't been touched in years. Even from here I could see the that windows were frosted with dust, and the doorknob was covered in rust. The paint on the door and window frames was a peeling blue, and the red bricks had all faded slightly. The roof was slanted and the black shingles were curled at the edges, baked by the sun. Weeds, berry bushes, and large mushrooms had grown around its perimeter, keeping it safe.

Facing us again, he waved his hand at our cabins. "Beyond there is the forest. The island is about twice as big as what's here, plus the cliff on the other side."

"But there's only a small bit that you're allowed to explore," Shebal said, appearing out of nowhere to stand beside Jason. He watched us with clouded eyes. "There's a bright orange rope marking the barrier. Stay on our side of it. It's not like you'll have a chance to slip off, though… Jason and I will be leading you, in your cabin groups, to explore the forest."

"When we're done, you'll have the rest of the day to yourselves," Jason added. "Dinner's at six, in bed by ten."

Chapter Sixteen (Morgan)

Jason took our group into the woods, walking ahead of the boys. He plodded through the undergrowth behind the two occupied cabins, Abigail at his side. Cherry was just ahead of me, and Laurie stayed as close to me as possible. She eyed all the low, leafy plants with the utmost caution.

"You know how to identify poison oak, right?" she asked shakily.

I nodded. "I don't see any. You're fine. Just wear high socks and be careful touching stuff."

Up ahead, I heard Abigail asking Jason, "Have you worked here before?"

"No, but I know this area. I live close by."

"Do you work at summer camps often?"

"No."

"Is it hard?"

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "You've probably noticed that I'm not the most confident person… It's fun, though. It's going to be fun anyway. I'm good at building things and, well, woodsy stuff. People just kinda… Make me nervous."

"At least you're not rude about it," she said. "Do you think you'll do this again?"

"I don't know if this camp will even run again, honestly. I'd

like it to. I'd like to work here specifically."

"Why wouldn't this camp run again?"

Laurie used my arm to hoist herself over a fallen log. Ahead of us, there was a large, flat rock bathed in sunlight. Jason and Abigail had gone ahead to see it and I couldn't hear the end of their conversation. Cherry followed them, but I was more interested in a plastic bag tangled in a young tree's branches.

"What are you doing?" Laurie asked as I leaned down to free it.

"Just tidying up. You can go ahead if you'd like."

I tried to pull it along the length of the branch so it didn't tear more and risk getting stuck worse, but the main branch had lots of little fingers, so I wiggled it back down and tore the hole through to the other side. Carefully, I picked up little shreds of plastic from the surrounding branches and the forest floor, then stuffed it all in my pocket.

"That's really kind of you," Laurie said, startling me a bit.

I blinked a few times to focus on her; my eyes were slower than usual to separate objects from the background. These are new woods to me, is all.

"I'm just doing my part," I mumbled with a small smile.

"That's more than a lot of people would think to do," she said.

We trailed behind the rest of the group as they looped around the edge of the island, where the ground turned to mud for a few feet before the water swallowed the land. They led us to the orange rope and walked along it. The forest hardly changed, aside from a long swampy patch that we avoided. Briefly, we saw the other group passing us when we were halfway to the other shore. The only difference in the whole stretch of woods was that the other shore was a sandy beach littered with pink, glittering shells. They were shaped like fans, but the bottom

part curled like a conch. Cherry picked some up before we walked back to our cabin.

"I loved those shells," Laurie told me when we'd gotten back inside. She was putting on more deodorant while Cherry washed her face in the bathroom with the door open. "They were so shiny, I wonder what they were from."

"That's why I grabbed some," Cherry said, turning the water off.

"To find out what they are? How?" I asked, throwing out the plastic bag in our garbage can.

"I'll look them up and if I can't find anything, I'll ask Ripley."

"Why him?"

"Why not him?" she asked, offended. "He's a smart kid."

"You could just ask Jason or Shebal. I'm sure they'd know better."

She made an annoyed noise, crossing her arms and leaning in the doorway. "I feel weird about them."

I looked up from where I'd be rooting through the cooler. "Do you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Jason's a bit…"

I nodded before she really said anything. "He makes me feel off. I can't put my finger on it. There's just something up with him."

Laurie looked at us both, confused and almost betrayed. "I think they're nice people…"

"They're nice, for sure," Cherry started, but was cut off when the door opened.

Abigail walked in. "Any of you want to go on a walk with me? I want to check out the dock."

I don't know why, but I put away the soda I was holding and closed the cooler. "I'll go with you."

"Aren't there big spiders under docks like that?" Laurie's voice quivered.

"None to worry about," Abigail said with a cheeky smile. "Would you or Cherry like to come?"

Laurie very quickly declined and Cherry apologized, saying the heat was a bit much for her. It was a fairly hot day, but I hadn't been too bothered by it. It kept the bugs off me.

"That's too bad," Abigail said, almost shyly, stepping back and holding the door for me.

I followed, waving bye to the girls. Laurie looked almost sad to see me go.

The walk to the shore was fairly short but very pleasant. Abigail didn't say much, but she was still interesting to be around, somehow. I liked the silence better than always being pestered, but I kind of missed Laurie's chatter.

The shore itself was a lot prettier in the daylight. There were smooth stones scattered around the sand, which was grayish and dotted with rotting seaweed. A large piece of driftwood in the shape of an arrow was washed up on the darker sand, pointing right at me. Something about that made me laugh.

"What's funny?" Abigail asked.

I pointed at the driftwood. "It's looking at me."

She raised an eyebrow but smiled a bit. "Yeah, it kinda is."

We both took our shoes off. She walked right up to the dock, testing the short staircase up to it before running down to the end. I watched her for a moment, enjoying the feeling of grass under my feet, before walking calmly to the dark, wet sand. It felt really nice between my toes. I paced around the arrow, leaving big, deep footprints in my wake. As I was leaning down to touch it, Abigail called my name.

My head shot up right away. "Hey?"

"Come over here," she said, waving me over from the end of the doc. "Unless you're afraid of snakes…"

"I'm not afraid of snakes!" I called back as I scrambled up the steps, which were surprisingly slippery. Maybe that was my bare, muddy feet, though.

Abigail sat down with her legs crossed, smiling up at me. Her face was still timid but her eyes were sparkling. Something about this made me excited in a way I'd never really felt before.

"You can smile around me," I said cheerfully, feeling excitement bubbling in my chest as she did.

She looked down at the water, her hand dangling lazily over the edge of the dock. One of her fingers was outstretched, tracing a delicate trail on the surface of the black water. There was a glimmer of movement in the water following her hand.

"Watch your fingers," I said cautiously, moving closer. My skin felt prickly all over and my vision got absurdly clear.

"It's okay, there's nothing to worry about. These ones aren't even venomous," she said, lifting her hand. After it came a sleek, flat-headed snake, the dappled brown and black scales coated in water from the speed of the eruption. It sort of flopped back down into the water, wiggling in a circle like it was looking for her.

"What…?"

"It's a northern water snake," she said simply, putting her hand back down. It followed her lead as she drew shapes on the surface of the lake.

"Wow," I said, my voice not quite mine. Restless, I rocked on my heels for a moment before laying down on my stomach, gripping the edge of the dock and staring down at the snake with wide eyes. A smile started to form on my face as I kept whispering about how cool this was. I didn't feel like myself

at all. There was a feeling of being watched and my throat felt tight, so I moved to get up and turn around, but something just below my chin caught my eye.

I sprang up immediately as my brain realized what shiny eyes and eight arched legs meant. Jumping in place, I shook out my hair and frantically wiped my clothes down. I'm not even that scared of spiders. What's gotten into me?

"What's up? Did you see something? A spider?" Abigail asked calmly, reaching under the dock.

I slowed down and watched as the fairly large, fairly furry dock spider crawled up her arm. Frozen in place, I watched, alert, until she gently put it back.

Behind me, Laurie called my name, and I felt a great weight be lifted from my chest as I turned around and ran over to her. The grass felt good on my feet, but not nearly as good as my shoes would. I scrubbed my feet off in the grass, listening to her tell me about some neat music she'd just found and how she'd like me to hear it.

"That would be really nice," I said, my voice feeling a lot more real. "I like listening to other people's music. It tells a lot about a person."

Laurie seemed to blush a bit as she agreed.

"I'm gonna shower now," I said, picking up my shoes. "I need to get this mud off my feet, and there's some weeds in my hair, I think."

"Your shirt's all covered in guck, too," she pointed out. "I really like that shirt. I hope it washes out easily…"

I shrugged. "I don't mind dirty clothes."

"What even happened?"

"Oh, I was laying down on the dock. Abigail found a water snake and then I got scared by a dock spider." Saying that out

loud made me realize how silly it sounded.

Her face went white. "There's dock spiders here?"

"None to worry about," Abigail said, coming up with her shoes too.

Laurie laughed nervously as we walked back to the cabin. I got my clean clothes and towel together before showering quickly, making sure to change in the washroom. I didn't meet my eyes in the mirror, feeling again like I was choking. I had to face the tub while I was changing, too. I couldn't look at myself.

What came over me at the dock with Abigail? Why was I so full of energy? Why was I so talkative and outgoing? That's not me. That's not me at all.

When I finally worked up the courage to leave the bathroom, feeling as flimsy as a sheet of wet paper, Laurie was the only one in the cabin. She was sitting on her bed, her laptop open beside her.

"Hey," she said with a warm smile, waving me over.

"Hey." I crossed the room after throwing my clothes at the floor beside my bed. Climbing the short ladder, I hauled myself up into her bed, curling at the edge.

"You can get comfortable," she said with a little laugh.

"I don't want to encroach," I said, stretching my hairy legs nervously. I really didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

"Don't worry, it's fine," she said, scooting up to her pillow so I had room to sit.

My head hit the ceiling as I sat up. Yelping, I ducked and held my head for a minute. She asked if I was okay and I gave her a thumbs up, slumping to my side and just deciding to lay down the whole time.

Laurie gave me a concerned look, asking again if I was okay.

I smiled up at her, anxiously saying, "I'm really okay, I do this

all the time."

"You seem pretty good on your feet to me…"

"I got big really fast and I never got used to it," I mumbled, which was only kind of true. Things aren't often made for all six feet of me, and I'm not too good at human motor skills. "So, what did you want me to hear?"

She stared blankly for a second before sitting up and saying, "Right. Music." She put on a Canadian rock band, but not the boring Canadian cool-guy rock that my dad, and every dad I've ever met, listened to.

"This isn't what I thought you'd listen to," I said softly, resting my head on my hands.

Her face turned bright red. "Do you want me to change it?"

"No no, I like it, you just seem more like… Indie rock and classical music, honestly."

She giggled. "That's what my parents like."

"My mom only listens to Taylor Swift, but she makes the whole house listen to her," I said. "I'd take Beethoven over that any day."

"I can't stand classical music," she said, her posture relaxing a bit. "Not only does my mom insist on playing it while my siblings and I are doing homework or studying, I had to listen to it every single day for an hour from grade three to grade six while I was made to attend my sister's piano lessons."

"Your parents give you designated study times?"

She nodded. "We have a special room and everything."

"Wow… That's a bit much."

"I know, right? I can study on my own. Besides, my brothers are always roughhousing and my sisters… Don't leave me alone."

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Four," she said with a tired sigh. "And we live with our grandmother too. I'm glad we have a big house, at least."

I raised my eyebrow. "Is your family rich? That would explain the suits…"

She pursed her lips. "Well… Yeah… We all go to private school and everything. We don't have multiple houses or cars, though, just two cars."

"Two cars?" I said, blowing a strand of hair out of my eyes.

"One is always home, for emergencies, in case Mom needs to take Grandma somewhere, or something like that."

I nodded. "What's private school even like? I go to public school… Hardly."

She shrugged. "It's not great. My dad lets me cut my hair at the end of the year, which is why it looked so nice when you met me."

"Your suit looked really nice, too," I said. "I like you better like this, though."

She looked down at her sheep pajamas and blushed. "Really?"

I coughed a bit, my voice cracking as I said, "Yeah, you look comfortable."

She tried to hide a smile, quickly putting on another song. Shame made my mouth taste bad. I hated when my voice did that. And I never should've said that to her. I can't be weird when I'm this close to actually having a friend.

Before we knew it, it was already time for dinner. Laurie put on different pants, but kept her pajama shirt on. We walked together to our table, meeting Abigail and Cherry inside. My heart was racing, but I couldn't tell why.

The evening went by quickly, and I was getting ready to sleep before I knew it. I felt like I was missing something the whole time, but I'd gone over everything a few times and nothing was

wrong. I tossed and turned for an hour or more before picking up my phone to confirm it had only been a few minutes. My sigh was so heavy that it fogged my phone screen.

As soon as I turned it off, it lit up in my face.

Ronnie, who I'd forgotten giving my number to, was asking me to meet Ripley outside as soon as possible. He added that it was a bit of an emergency.

I said I'll be there, then threw on clothes and stepped outside. Nobody noticed me leaving.

Ripley was there in a flash, clutching the front of his pajama shirt and shaking a bit. He looked deeply worried.

"Hey, what's up? What do you need?" I asked gently, instinctively wanting to hug him but not wanting to push any boundaries.

"I'm sorry for bothering you so late," he said nervously, "but I forgot to pack any, uh, any pads…"

It took me a second to understand what he was asking for, and when I did, my face went white. I knew he could see it too; he started stuttering but it wasn't really words and he got jumpy.

"Don't worry, I'm not upset or anything," I said quickly, holding my hand out to him. "It's nothing bad, I just don't, uh… I don't have any…"

He looked like he was about to cry as he took my hand. "I can't use anything but those…"

"It's alright, I can ask the other girls," I said, squeezing his hand softly. "I'll be right back. Sit tight, okay?"

He nodded and I hurried inside. I hovered in the middle of the room for a minute, working up the courage to wake everyone.

"Hey?" I whispered, then swallowed and spoke again louder, "Hey? Is anyone up? There's a bit of an emergency."

"Emergency?" Cherry mumbled sleepily. "What's?"

"Ripley needs pads," I said.

She grumbled something incoherent and kicked a package of them under her curtain. Above her, Laurie mewled.

I thanked her quickly, trying to keep my voice steady as I grabbed them and hurried back out. I didn't really know what to do with the package so I just handed it to Ripley, my heart in my throat. He opened it and took out a couple, stuffing them in the pockets of his pajama pants. He thanked me and gave me a tight hug before running back to his cabin. I stood outside in the cool air for a few moments before returning inside, placing the package on the floor near the bunk bed. The absurdity of pajamas with pockets kept my mind calm enough to sleep.

That morning, Cherry took Ripley to the store up the road to buy some for himself. While Abigail and Laurie helped clean up after breakfast, I washed my shirt in the sink.

Chapter Seventeen (Ronnie)

The first week of camp went by fairly quickly. Soon, even the way the two counselors banged on the door so we'd get up in the morning gave me a sense of belonging. Ripley's stories about corn wolves, jackalopes, and Bigfoot didn't bother me as much anymore, and things had been fairly normal here. I was starting to feel invisible when I was hit with a wave of numbing, headache-inducing hunger halfway through a game of relay racing on the beach.

When I passed my baton off, I tried to act like the heat was getting to me and slunk off to talk to Shebal, who was staring at this weird looking piece of driftwood nearby. It looked a bit like an arrow, pointing into the lake.

"Excuse me, uh, Shebal?" I said.

He jumped, then apologized and asked how he could help me.

"I'm not feeling very well. Is it okay if I go lay down?"

He nodded. "You get sick in the sunlight, right?"

I paused before saying, "Yeah, that's all this is," a little too defensively.

"I figured. I remember you listed that along with a garlic intolerance."

I blinked, my body feeling perfectly still. "Yeah, I did…"

"I hope you feel better by the evening," he said with a cheeky

smile. "It's Friday. We're having our first bonfire tonight."

I smiled, a little tense, and said, "I'm sure I'll be fine. Thank you," before hurrying off to the cabin.

Once I was inside, I took my hat and shirt off and tossed them at the floor. A sheen of sweat covered my body. My arms were shaking with the need to exert energy. That wasn't good. Had I been too caught up in the fun of this place to pick up on early symptoms? After finding my personal first-aid kit, I rushed to the washroom and shut the door firmly behind me. Spit was dripping from my lips and my fangs hurt. I was so hungry all of a sudden that my vision blurred when I looked at myself.

It took me a moment to get the pill case open. My fingers were twitchy and it took some energy to focus. I put a couple of the dusty, off-red pills into my mouth, trying to swallow them dry. I gave up and drank from the sink, the rush of water down my throat feeling a bit like blood if I made the water hot enough.

Next thing I knew, I was sitting on the edge of the tub, whimpering softly. I stroked my hair back comfortingly. I'd had no clue I'd been missing signs. This was far too close. A juvenile mistake like this could cost lives. Mom wouldn't be proud of me.

Looking at the bottle of pills on the floor, I wondered how Mom knew how to make these. They were just blood and sugar, but what did she make them with, and how'd she learn? She hasn't taught me yet. Did her parents teach her?

Her… Parents…

Oh, how am I so stupid?

I'm half vampire. My mother is a vampire, my father is not. She's gotta have parents who are vampires because she told me we aren't the kind of vampires who turn others, so she and I are

not the only vampires in the world. We're not the only different people in the world.

There should've been more of a bang with that realization, but my body was full of tension and dull aches. I was still hungry. All I felt was numb and the need for blood.

I cleaned up my things and hid my first-aid kit again. Taking off my clothes, I shook myself out a bit before loosening a bit of the padding on the bottom of the door. There was now enough room for a little mouse to sneak out.

Taking a deep breath, I let my body be still, and I changed. I'd only done this a couple times, so the tingling was still kind of scary. It didn't hurt, though, not after the first time.

Looking up at the tall walls and the long floor made my head spin. It was all so huge from down here… Trying not to disorient myself, I ran right for the door, scurrying out from the little hole I'd made. The smells of the outside overwhelmed me momentarily and I had to sit, collecting myself. My heart beat so hard in my little chest. I hated thinking about this body, it made me dizzy and confused. So I just stuck to the plan.

I leaped down the steps. Grass swallowed me whole.

It took me a minute or two to get myself to the woods behind my cabin. When I did, I focused on the map of scents, and let myself take a few moments to pinpoint a single squirrel.

Am I really gonna do this?

I tracked the squirrel down to where it slept in its drey, a few feet above the ground in a tree trunk. It took a long time, scurrying along under the brambles and the carpet of leaves and moss, over roots and fallen branches. I'd walked this path before, both on the second day and yesterday during tag, and it had been so much easier. I guess it takes some perspective to appreciate how big the world is.

It's not like animal blood isn't what I'm used to, but…

I scrambled up the trunk, clinging to the bark with tiny claws.

… A squirrel? Really?

I peeked inside, seeing the small, furry animal all curled up, deeply asleep, covered in a blanket of gray tail. I felt dizzy as I scurried back down, but not just from the vertigo. I let myself change back. Closing my eyes made the tears run down my cheeks. As fast and silent as a mouse, I reached in, grabbed the creature, and brought it to my mouth. My fangs were in its writhing body before it could claw at my face. The seizing of muscle under my teeth made me want to throw up. I felt its tail flutter and tap against my cheek before it fell still. The blood tasted dirtier than cow or sheep.

Wow, I am disgusting. Standing naked in the woods in broad daylight, gulping down squirrel blood, shaking and crying.

Who am I?

I just kept drinking. I was so hungry, and by the time I was full, the little animal had stopped moving entirely. Usually they were sluggish. Maybe I just put it to sleep, but Mom said the chemicals that made the animals calm when we drew their blood weren't enough to do that. Maybe it was different for something so small. I cradled it, smoothing the fur over the bite wound on its back.

"Shh," I whispered, folding its little paws over its chest. Its tail hung limply off my wrist.

Panic started to climb up my throat, like the blood still settling in my stomach.

Carefully, so carefully, I pushed a finger against its chest. I waited. I waited some more. I waited so long I started to get pins and needles in my feet. But the whole time, I felt nothing, no heartbeat.

"Oh no oh no oh no."

I dropped the squirrel and collapsed onto my knees, holding my head in my hands, fists in my hair. I rocked on the balls of my feet, gritting my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut. Even though all I wanted to do was throw up, I knew that if I did, I'd have to do this all over again. That would have to happen again eventually, but not so soon. I couldn't handle that.

I stayed like that until the feeling passed. Until all feeling passed, all but how much of a monster I am. I didn't want this. This monster, this killer, this beast.

Why am I this?

Mourning, I shed this skin again and crept back home, back through the mouse hole. I waited in the shadows for a moment to make sure I was alone before changing back, gathering some fresh clothes, and holing up in the bathroom again. I washed my face and rinsed out my mouth a few times, scrutinizing my appearance for a few moments.

The door to the cabin opened. I shut off the water quickly, standing still and listening to the two boys talk. After a minute or so, I opened the door and stepped out.

They both turned to look at me, shocked.

"Hey," I said, my voice shaking a bit as I instinctively wiped my mouth.

"Where were you?" Ripley said a little pointedly, putting his hands on his hips.

"He was just in the bathroom, Ripley," Barclay said with a sigh. "He was probably taking a shower or something."

They both looked at me for confirmation.

"Yeah, I was…" I mumbled, rubbing the back of my neck. I couldn't look at either of them.

"I'll go tell Jason that we found you," Barclay said, sighing

again and fiddling with his shirt collar. He looked like he couldn't be happier to get out of the cabin.

As soon as the door was closed, Ripley turned on me.

"So what were you really doing, Ronnie?"

I stiffened. "I was having a shower."

"We were in here not five minutes ago and the water was off."

"I was out already."

"The bathroom door was open. And it was closed when we came back just a second ago!"

"I… I don't mind showering with the door open if I'm in here alone."

"We would've seen you."

I sucked at my teeth nervously, trying to think. "Well, the bathroom is pretty narrow and the tub is up against the far wall…"

"You would've heard us, then, and responded when we said your name."

"I had water in my ears," I snapped, stalking across the room to my bed.

Ripley ducked into the bathroom, then came out with a devious look on his face. "Your towel is dry, and there's no water in the tub or on the floor."

I didn't have an answer for that, so I kept my back turned and pretended to be looking for something in my bag.

The bathroom light didn't turn off and Ripley was quiet for a suspiciously long time before saying, "What's this in the sink?"

My heart could've stopped.

"Fur?"

"Don't touch that," I said, bursting into the washroom. I grabbed it and threw it in the toilet, flushing it. "Wash your hands, okay?"

He nodded timidly, turning the taps on with his elbow and washing his hands thoroughly. I did as well.

"What was that?" he asked, a little less aggressively.

"Fur," I mumbled awkwardly. "Squirrel fur…"

"What…?"

"Don't ask."

"Oh come on," he said, rocking a bit. He was gaining his spunk back. "You can't just vanish and reappear with squirrel fur and be all ominous about it."

I gestured to myself vaguely. "I'm doing that right now, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but you're not allowed to," he whined, smiling playfully.

I sighed, staring blankly at the floor. "This isn't a joke."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd really rather not tell you about this."

Ripley was silent for a minute, his cheer fading again. I knew he'd respect clear boundaries, so I figured this was an out. I started to walk away back to my bed, but he gently put his hand on my arm.

"This is actually scaring me," he said flatly.

I stopped, leaning back against the door frame. "Why?"

"Well, you're just being all weird and there's squirrel fur in the sink and you… You smell like…"

I swallowed hard, unable to process the fear in his eyes. "It's okay, Ripley, I'm not gonna hurt you or anybody else."

"I'm scared for you, not of you!" he cried, balling his hands into fists. "I don't want you getting hurt."

"I won't, okay?"

His mouth opened and closed a few times before he asked me to just tell him what's going on.

I choked on a yes and a no, studying his face. I couldn't make

something up on the spot. I never really had to do that, so I never learned how. If I told him the truth, I'd be blowing my cover, and not to just anyone. I'd rather tell Barclay that I'm a vampire, and I'd been having trouble saying good morning to him all week.

When I remembered what I'd realized in the bathroom not an hour ago, it tipped me over the edge. What did I have to lose, really, if I wasn't completely alone in the world?

"Alright, I'll tell you," I sighed, sucking at my teeth.

His eyes lit up with relief, genuine curiosity hiding beneath.

"Okay, just do it, like ripping off a bandaid," I mumbled to myself. "I'm… Ripley, I'm a vampire."

"A v—?!"

"Don't!" I raised my voice to cover his, then repeated myself in a harsh whisper. "Don't tell anybody. You really can't tell anybody."

It took him a second but he nodded enthusiastically, bouncing on his toes and flapping his arms. "I promise I'll keep it a secret."

"Thank you," I said, panic settling in like a buzz in my brain. Shadows pulsed at the edges of my vision, in time with my heartbeat. "It's a very important secret, so you can't tell anyone at all. I'm the only one."

"No you're not," he immediately said.

"Yes I am," I snapped, confused at how defensive I was of that. Did I really believe that still? Did it really matter? "Well, me and my mother. And her parents."

"But there's others," he insisted, standing up a little straighter. When I tensed up, he seemed to know to drop it, and said instead, "Well… If it's okay I'd like to ask you some questions."

I frowned. "You're not putting me down in that book of yours."

The corner of his mouth twitched a bit. "Why not?"

"Because that's an invasion of my privacy. And I just told you like three times that you can't tell anybody."

"Do you think people read my book?" he said with a bit of a pout. "It's not going to be published anywhere or anything like that. It's for my research and my knowledge."

"What are you doing with it, then, if you're not sharing it?"

He looked nervously at the ground, squeezing his palms together. "I want to find as many of these creatures as possible, and help keep them safe…"

I had to ignore the fact that he saw me as one of those creatures, but I found his innocence and kindness very sweet. "That's really… That's kind of you, Ripley. But I am a person, not a creature."

He nodded, apologizing. "I don't really have a blanket word for magical things is all. That's not even quite right. Magic is, like, spells; you learn it, not be it."

I raised an eyebrow. I hadn't considered it that way. "That's interesting."

"You must already know all this, though, so—"

"I really don't," I said, cutting him off by accident. "Mom doesn't really tell me things about, well, anything but the two of us. She taught me that we're the only ones." Those words felt weird in my mouth.

"Well, I guess you're lucky to have met me," he said cheekily, smiling.

I laughed a bit, but agreed genuinely, which made him smile even more.

"So, is it a deal? I'll teach you about the world and magic if you tell me how you work?"

I sucked at my teeth, nervousness crawling around in my

stomach. Even if this scared me in concept, what did I really have to lose by learning? And I had no reason to lack trust in him.

"Sure," I said finally, holding out my hand. "Deal."

He pumped his fist in the air and squealed delightedly, then realized he should shake my hand, so he did with a slightly nervous giggle.

Before long, we were called to dinner, but I didn't find myself too hungry, so I gave my food to Morgan. As soon as we were finished eating, we were brought down to the bonfire circle where Jason had started fixing up the stones to make a proper ring. We were instructed to find kindling, and when we had enough, we lit our pile of sticks and dried brambles on fire. Marshmallows and metal skewers were passed around, and Ripley was given permission to tell a ghost story. He even got a flashlight to make scary faces with, which was probably his favorite part of the whole experience. I enjoyed listening to him, but I still wasn't hungry, so I wanted to give my marshmallows to Barclay. When I turned to see if he was there, I saw him moving away to sit with Laurie and Morgan. I sighed to myself and moved closer to Cherry, sharing with her.

Ripley's pauses and stutters, which got worse with his sleepiness, were covered up for the most part by the rhythmic lapping of the lake, which was right behind us. All around us too, really, but I felt like it was watching my back in particular. Right as Ripley was about to get to the good part of his story, which I could tell from the way he was leaning ever closer to the fire and his audience, there was a loud, strange wailing noise that filled the air.

Everyone got quiet. Especially Shebal.

The sound came again, this time like a gurgling shout. There

was a break in the rhythm of the lake.

"Let's head inside for the night," Shebal said firmly. "It's getting late. The bugs are biting."

Nobody moved or responded.

"Seriously, let's go."

The thing by the garbage bins flashed in my mind again. That's all it took for all of us to get up and hurry back to our cabins. The whole time I slept, I felt like something was looming on the doorstep, watching, waiting.

Chapter Eighteen (Morgan)

That sound didn't scare me into my bed for the night. No, I had to investigate.

As I got up to leave, Laurie came out of the washroom.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Oh, I think I left my phone by the fire pit," I said nonchalantly. "I'm just gonna go look for it."

"Do you want me to come look with you?"

I shook my head. "You're already in your pajamas, it's okay."

"Do you want to borrow my flashlight, then?"

I smiled a bit. "I've got good night vision, remember?"

"Right, you do," she said, her cheeks turning a pale red. "Well, stay safe… The bugs are pretty bad, and Shebal seemed angry. I don't want you getting in trouble."

"Don't worry about me," I said gently. "I'll keep myself safe. Goodnight and sleep well, Laurie."

I went into the night alone. Something in me ached, and it wasn't the familiar pain in my joints and muscles. As the door closed behind me, I slipped off into the woods behind the cabins. Once I was safely within the treeline, I found a large stone and pushed it aside, taking the plastic bag out from under my shirt before digging a shallow hole. I stuffed my clothes and phone inside. There were a couple unread messages.

Laurie: Right as you left I figured I could call your phone to help you find it, but then I was like, oh, I don't know her ringtone, or if it's even on.

Laurie: Anyway, I hope you find it soon. I left the calamine on the counter for you. Goodnight and sleep well, Morgan :)

My heart warmed, but I didn't respond. I put everything into the bag, then put the bag in the hole, and replaced the rock. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I changed.

It was more difficult this time. Longer. It hurt. Not very much, but it didn't feel like nothing. When everything had settled into place, I felt right, but being here didn't.

I struck out right away after scent marking the rock thoroughly. I tried to stick to the path we'd taken on the second day, heading to the shore where the bridge was, but there were so many interesting and distracting smells I wanted to follow. A mouse, a squirrel, a porcupine, some rotting wood, a muskrat, a snake. Who knew so much could happen in such a small space?

But I mustn't forget why I'm out here. There will be another time to explore these plentiful woods.

I turned my nose to the damp, watery wind, picking out a few concerning scents. Something not quite cat, something not quite fish, and blood. Flattening my ears, I crept along the path to the shore, keeping within the trees. From the top of the rise, I couldn't see much, just the glimmer of the moon on the lapping waves, the bridge, that weird piece of driftwood…

Wait, was it bobbing? Sand doesn't move like that.

I pressed closer to the ground and peeked over the hill to get a better look. The wood seemed to have been dragged into the water… Yes, there were the drag marks in the dark sand. The sand around them was dark, but the rest of the sand was lighter. Taking a slow, silent breath, I was hit with the overpowering

reek of blood.

I scanned the area with my ears, eyes, and nose, searching for any signs that I would be seen if I went down there. After a few long seconds, there seemed to be nothing. I broke my cover and carefully padded down the slope, trying to stay on the grass so my paw prints wouldn't be seen. Straining my neck to see the tracks, I couldn't pin what made them. The mix of cat, fish, and not quite right smells were overwhelming me. From this angle, I couldn't even see the driftwood. I had to get closer.

The wet sand felt bad under my paws. All I could smell was blood, so much I could taste it. I whined softly, peering at the tracks around the drag marks. They looked kind of like arms, with a definite hand print here and there. Paws, feline paws, were scattered around too. Most were small, like a house cat, but there was a larger set too. There were tufts of black fur and a trail of thicker, darker blood leading off into the woods, where the paw prints had retreated to.

But in the sand, there was a lot of blood too, so much that something might have died.

"Hey!"

I froze. There was anger in that voice, a human voice, behind and above me. I turned as I heard the person running down the slope. When I saw Shebal, I was filled with worse fear than before.

What if he tells Mommy? What if I get sent home? What if he hurts me? What if he thinks I made this mess?

"Get out of here," he growled, really growled, his eyes flashing bluish silver. "Go on, this isn't for you."

Tucking my tail between my legs, I backed off a bit, wondering how he could do that. Humans don't have eyeshine. And why wasn't he yelling at me to get back to my cabin?

Oh, oh wait. I'm a wolf. He doesn't know I'm me.

I started to turn to flee into the trees, but he didn't seem to notice that I was already giving up. He stepped forward, likely trying to scare me off again, but there was something fuzzy and warm about him. He looked like he was glowing for a moment, a soft yellow glow that consumed his whole body. Then, suddenly, a white tiger leaped at me, growling and swiping at the air inches from my face.

I yelped and wheeled around, tearing off into the forest with my tail firmly between my legs and my ears flat against my skull. I ran until I nearly crashed into that rock we'd passed. Scrambling to a stop, I pressed my body against the rock, shaking all over. What was any of that?

I couldn't get my thoughts in order to ask the right questions, let alone find answers for them. I waited a long time before slinking back to my cache and changing. By the time I returned to bed, everyone was fast asleep. I didn't sleep at all.

In the morning, things were tense. The beach had been cleaned, but I could still smell the blood as we walked to the dining hall.

Laurie seemed to be the only person who was acting normal at breakfast. Cherry poked her cereal around, looking like she was going to pass out. Abigail spent the majority of the time looking out the window at the beach and lake. At the boys' table, Ripley was bothering Ronnie about his breakfast, asking weirder questions than usual, from what I could overhear. Barclay was very distant, not engaging in any discussions. Even Jason seemed a bit on edge, and Shebal… Well, he was completely unlike himself. Silent, morose, jumpy.

I was in my own head, eating as a passive action while I contemplated last night. If Shebal was some kind of weretiger,

then I'm sure I could talk to him about being a werewolf, but then he'd know it was me. Even if I just asked him what that was all about, he'd know it was me, or that I'd seen him somehow. He might blame me for what happened, whatever that was. That was getting me, too. Those were human arms and human hands that had dragged around in the sand, so that must've been human blood, but it smelled strongly of fish. I was scared for whoever had bled that much, but I was baffled at what it could've been. It seemed that Shebal was the only person with answers. But to get those answers, I'd be putting myself in a lot of potential danger.

I could ask Suzanne, but should I? Would that help me or just stress us both out more? Would she even know what was going on?

Worse, what if she wanted to send me home, thinking this place was too dangerous for me?

Looking at Laurie drowsily eating her cereal, and Cherry totally asleep on the table, having pushed her bowl over to me to finish, I knew I couldn't leave.

"What's on your mind, Morgan?" Abigail asked, startling me a bit.

I whined happily, smiling wider than I thought I could. A rush of emotion left me shaking. It felt like my insides were boiling, in a good way, and I was full of sparkles. I felt like an excited, happy little kid.

Practically feeling my tail wagging, even though I didn't have one in this body, I said, "I just love you guys a lot."

Chapter Nineteen (Ronnie)

Shebal was really weird at breakfast, telling us we had a day off from activities, but to stay out of the woods and off the shores. He refused help for the dishes as well, dismissing us all and talking to Jason firmly but quietly as we left.

Outside, the whole group of us stayed together, meandering around the grassy clearing between the buildings. The air was warm and smelled kind of fishy, and there was the faintest hint of rain. The clouds kept the sun off me for the most part, but I was still glad I'd remembered to put on sunscreen this morning. Laurie had crouched to look at some clovers, so Ripley joined her, looking for ones with more than three leaves. Abigail picked a caterpillar up off one of the stones near the fire pit, carrying it around while Morgan followed her like a curious little dog. Cherry, Barclay, and I were left walking idly in lazy circles around the fire pit. He still didn't want to talk to me more than a few words.

"That was too weird," Cherry said after a while, stopping the three of us beside Laurie and Ripley. "What Shebal said, I mean."

"Right?" Ripley said, sitting up and crossing his legs.

"I don't know… It makes sense, with those noises last night," Laurie mumbled, laying down on the grass.

"Yeah, but what were those noises? Why was he so ominous

about it last night too?" Cherry retorted.

"Probably just some animals fighting," Laurie said with a shrug.

"Why would he be so weird about that?"

Laurie focused on some flowering clovers in front of her. "I don't know… I'm sorry," she said meekly.

Cherry took a shallow breath, hugging her arms. "It's okay, I'm sorry for getting heated about this. There's just something… Strange about this place."

Ripley grinned. "I did warn you all…"

Cherry nodded grimly. "I'm afraid you're right. Like, for real."

"Where's your proof?" I challenged, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

"Oh, I'm sure you have proof," Ripley said slyly, looking up at me.

Cherry raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Glaring at Ripley for a moment, I said, "I. Don't. Know, Cherry, I think he's just kidding around."

He started to open his mouth, then his eyes widened and he shut it.

"Right?"

"Right…" He looked away quickly, occupying his hands with the grass.

"Well," Cherry said, collecting herself, "I think I have some pretty solid proof."

"Let's hear it," I said, sitting on one of the logs. She sat beside me, with Barclay on her other side, facing the girls and Ripley.

"Okay, first of all, did nobody else think it was weird that even though we'd never heard of this place, none of us thought to look it up? And then the fact that there was no driver on that bus. I don't know if anybody else noticed, but I didn't see

a driver at all. Every time I got on the bus I figured they'd just stepped out or something, and I never felt the need to look otherwise. But I saw there was nobody when the bus drove off."

"How's that possible?" Morgan interrupted. She had sat between Abigail and Laurie, cross-legged with her hands planted firmly on the ground in front of her. "Magical animals and plants and all that, that's one thing, but machines don't have anything to do with nature, so if this place is like, a magical nature reserve, that doesn't add up."

Ripley perked up right away, his eyes shining happily. "Well, first, thanks for pointing that out, I'd missed it," he said to Cherry, then turned to Morgan. "This place is a magical nature reserve… That's the best way I've heard someone put it. But the outside world has an influence on it still. The deeper you go, the more likely you are to find things that wouldn't just blend seamlessly into our world, and you'll find our influence in lots of places, so that bus could be a living machine from an abandoned car lot or something that got taken over by the… The spirit of this place," he rambled, finding a place to pause and breathe. "You're not exclusively going to find unicorns and dragons and that kind of thing. You'll also find things we've made up, like cryptids, or speculative evolution, or some fantasy things in media, or even just things that came from our world like that bus."

"So what are you specifically saying we can find here?" Laurie said, teasing him gently but awkwardly. "Like, what kind of media references?"

He frowned, rapping his fists on his legs. "I'm saying you could find things like mimics and dwarves and elves."

Laurie smiled and closed her eyes, rolling onto her back. "Now that would be interesting."

"I'm not joking! I've seen a mimic," he said desperately.

"Hey, no need to get upset," Cherry said softly. "I believe you. You should tell us about that later. But I have more to say, and I don't want Jason to come out and interrupt us."

He looked sheepish for a moment, then said, "Okay, I will…"

She looked to the side for a moment, thinking. "Where was I? Right. The guy at the store. I don't want to sound rude, but I think… I think he was green… And he had tusks."

There was a general mumble of agreement, and I kept my sigh to myself.

"Jason seems like a fairly normal guy, but Shebal freaks me out," she continued. "He's always been a little weird about us going near the water unsupervised or wandering too far into the woods, even inside the orange line. And what's with that line anyway? What's so important beyond it? Like, I'm probably just looking for things to believe, and it's probably a safety thing, but considering everything else…" She closed her eyes and shook her head, her beads rattling with the movement. "I don't know."

Morgan looked away, watching the door to the main building for a moment, focused. Right as Barclay started to speak, the door opened and Jason walked out. He looked worried and upset, crossing the grass to us quickly.

"What are you guys talking about?" he asked, trying to sound interested instead of awkward and anxious.

"Oh nothing," I said before Ripley could give us away. "What's up? Is Shebal alright? He wasn't acting himself."

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked anywhere but at our faces. "He didn't sleep very well is all."

"Did those noises in the lake keep him up?" Ripley asked.

Jason gave him a hard look and started to speak.

"Yeah, they kept me up," I said a little harshly, cutting him off.

I glanced at Ripley to see if he was okay; I didn't want him to be scared of Jason getting mad.

Morgan nodded and yawned. "I didn't sleep at all."

"Well, the situation is being taken care of," Jason blurted, his cheeks getting bright red. "It's nothing to worry about and it won't happen again."

"How can you be sure?" Cherry asked, seeming ready to argue with him about this.

"What was it, anyway?" Ripley chipped in with a glance at me. He wanted to fuel the fire.

"Yeah, I've never heard a fish roar," Abigail said smoothly.

Morgan sat up straight.

Jason, finally able to get a word in, spoke in a voice not unlike a growl. "It wasn't from the lake. It was a coyote. End of discussion. Understood?"

The whole group of us were frozen in fear at his tone. I looked at my feet as Cherry spoke for us and quietly said that we get it.

Jason sighed, visibly tense. "I'm sorry. That was very immature of me. You just shouldn't be worrying about it so much, we're not going to let anything bad happen to you." He then turned his face to the wind. "It's gonna rain soon," he said softly. "You may want to head inside."

I didn't take that as a suggestion. I stood up and stormed off into my cabin, my hands shoved into my pockets. I went to the bathroom to wash my face, and when I stepped out, Ripley was in the room.

"Hey," he said, holding his book up to his chest, "do you w—"

"I want to talk, is what I want to do," I said a little too sharply, making him flinch. I immediately apologized and asked if he was okay.

Looking embarrassed, he mumbled, "Yeah, I'm alright. Ja-

son… Scared me a little bit. I don't like when people raise their voices."

"I'm sorry," I repeated, taking my hat and sunglasses off. "I try not to get like that and I'm gonna do better. I'm just a little upset about how you've been almost slipping up about not telling people…"

"That you're a vampire, right," he said, smiling nervously. "I'm sorry… It's so exciting to finally meet a vampire, I wanna talk about it all the time!"

I sighed softly, sucking at my teeth.

"But I know I can't," he continued. "It would be disrespectful."

"And it would put me in danger, Ripley! This isn't just a matter of respecting my wishes. My mother and I might have our lives put in serious danger if people found this out. I trust you, you won't hurt us, you think it's a fun game, but anybody else here could try to kill me even if people only know that I drink blood."

"You drink blood?"

"Animal blood."

"Of course," he said, "but that's so exciting…"

I rolled my eyes.

"Wait," he said, his eyes visibly changing with his tone. "What do you mean, I think this is a fun game? I'm not joking about any of this, how I study Silent Woods and the creatures here, and how I want to keep them safe. I wouldn't put you in danger, that goes directly against who I am! None of this is a game to me. Just because it wouldn't be my life that's endangered if people found out you're a vampire, that doesn't mean I don't care. And just because it's exciting to me doesn't mean I don't take it seriously."

I got choked up at the passion in his voice. I walked past him quickly to put my things down, secretly wiping my eyes on my

sleeve.

"You're allowed to cry, Ronnie," he said softly but seriously from behind me. "I don't think you're any less of anything for that."

Again, his words hit me like a truck. I sat down on my bed, the muscles in my arms, chest, and back all as tight as they could be. I felt like I was about my snap under my own weight. My face was hot, but I wasn't sure if I was crying or not. I refused to look at him.

"Can I sit with you?"

I nodded. The movement of the bed as he sat somehow allowed me to talk, and the words came out like a faucet left on. "I'm sorry, Ripley. It's not you, it's not how you treat me or any of this. It's Cherry. When we were kids, she was always looking for that werewolf she talked about, it consumed her life. She thought it was the best thing in the world, some sad person who could painfully turn into a creature that people would want to see dead. Of course she didn't see it that way, but I know, I knew. It wasn't even just that I thought I was the only one. It was how she treated it like a silly game."

He listened quietly.

"My life isn't a children's story. I'm always hiding because somebody might try to hurt my mother for what we are. And having to go stand in a cold, dirty field and help her siphon cow blood into Ziploc bags before it wakes up or the sun comes up… That's not my idea of a fun Friday night, but what's what we do, Ripley."

He hummed softly, thinking, as I caught my breath and pieced together the words I just said. Out loud. To him.

"I understand," he said gently, "and I forgive you. I would like to learn more about your life, though, respectfully."

I felt a little lightheaded. "I don't know if I want you knowing any of this… I suppose it's too late for that to change," I mumbled, laughing from the panic.

"I… Yeah, it's too late for me to not know, but I promise I won't tell anybody," he said. "Double, triple, upside-down, banana split with whipped cream promise."

"What?" I looked up at him, rubbing my face.

He smiled shyly. "My dad and I do that when it's a very serious promise."

I laughed a bit. "That's sweet… Do I have to repeat it?"

He nodded, his eyes twinkling.

"Uh… Double, triple… Upside-down… Banana split with whipped cream promise…?"

"Yeah, you got it!" He gave me a high five, grinning.

The door opened and Barclay walked in. He looked like he'd been rained on.

Ripley started laughing uncontrollably.

"Oh, is it really that funny to see me soaked like this?" Barclay snorted.

"I'm not laughing at you," Ripley said between giggles. "Promise!"

"What's funny, then?" I asked, smiling. Seeing him so happy brightened my mood too.

"Oh, nothing," he said, jumping up. As he plopped his book onto his bed, he said to me, "We have lots to talk about later. I'm gonna go look for frogs."

Just like that, he was out the door.

Alone with me, Barclay was instantly quieter, gathering some fresh clothes and asking me mildly if I needed the washroom.

"No," I said. "Are you alright? You haven't been acting quite like yourself."

He paused in the door, turning the light on. "I don't think you have the authority to say that."

I winced.

"But thank you for noticing. I'll be fine," he smiled, and there was an air of nervousness under his cool atmosphere.

Then the door was shut and locked and I was all alone.

Chapter Twenty (Morgan)

Once the dark clouds rolled in, the four of us went inside, leaving Barclay on his own. We'd been talking for a little bit about some drama with Ronnie. It was mostly Cherry and Laurie talking to him. I'd been more interested in looking at bugs on the ground with Abigail.

Inside, we all sat on Abigail's bed, with her up on the pillows knitting, Cherry and Laurie closer to the foot, and me in the middle. I stretched out on my stomach, watching the two girls talk. They were talking about school, and how their families were. Cherry had a big, loving family, and went to my school, though I'd never seen her before. But when she said that she worked in the cafeteria during lunch, I remembered that I definitely did know her: she was the ridiculously pretty girl who gave me a free cookie every so often when I didn't have enough money and needed breakfast.

"Oh, I go there, I know you," I blurted, blushing. I didn't know why I said that.

She looked at me quizzically, as though she was trying to place my face.

"You give me free food sometimes," I mumbled, covering my mouth with my hand as I trailed off.

"Oh!" she said, her face lighting up. "Yeah, I remember you.

I haven't seen you in a while, though. Did you start bringing breakfast?"

I nodded. "And you changed your hair."

She smiled shyly. "I figured it had been too long since I had it like this."

"I like this a lot," I said, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice. "You're very pretty."

She fluttered her eyelashes a bit but thanked me like it was a normal compliment. It was just a normal compliment, right?

The conversation died for a moment, then Cherry brought up the beach we'd seen, with those sparkly shells. She got up and went to the bunk bed, reaching under it.

"I remember you said you liked those shells, Laurie," she said, pulling something out and standing.

Laurie stumbled over her words, but essentially said, "Oh, that's nice of you…"

"Well, I hope you like this." Cherry turned and held out a little necklace with two small, shining shells flanking a larger one. "You don't have any jewelry so I don't know…"

Laurie's face seemed to be overloaded by the amount of emotions on it. She seemed equally shocked, overjoyed, and mortified. "What do you mean? I love this, this is so sweet, I… Thank you so much…"

Cherry smiled brightly, handing her the necklace. "I'm really glad you like it, you'll look great with this. Not that you don't already look great."

Laurie's eyes widened as she took it clumsily. "Oh… Thank you…"

Something about that made me feel all sorts of ways, but I couldn't put my finger on what or why. I turned my back on them as they giggled and talked awkwardly but happily. I was

more content to watch Abigail knit, seemingly, even though I didn't care much about knitting. Or her, really. She was kind, funny, and quiet, all things I sought in a friend, but I truly did care a lot more about Laurie than anybody else here.

I should be talking to Laurie, shouldn't I?

As I turned back around, there was a knock at the door. We all paused and looked up at it before Cherry laughed nervously.

"I should probably answer that," she said, glancing at Laurie and tucking her hands into her pockets. She crossed the floor and opened the door.

Shebal was standing there, rain dripping off him, plastering his silvery white hair to his angular, wide-featured face. His eyes were intense and seemed to glow in the shade from the dark clouds outside.

"Hi," Cherry said, her voice wavering a bit. "Is there something wrong? You look…"

He sighed softly but grimly. "There's nothing wrong, I just have a serious question for you and your cabinmates."

She nodded. "Do you want to come in?"

"No, it's alright. We're not allowed to do that unless it's an emergency anyway."

"I don't want you catching a cold—"

"It's fine." His harsh look cut her off. "Have any of you noticed anything strange happening in the woods?"

Abigail put down her knitting and looked up. "Strange like what?"

"Sounds, anything you've seen that doesn't seem right," he said, looking down for a moment.

"What wouldn't seem right?"

He paused, uncomfortably removing some water-slick hair from his face. "Animals that wouldn't belong."

"What sort of animals?"

Something seemed to snap in him. "Cats," he growled, his eyes flashing. "Dangerous cats who shouldn't be here."

We all stopped.

Cherry crossed her arms warily. "Why would there be…?"

"You know," I mumbled a little too loudly, "that makes sense."

Shebal turned to me immediately, locking me down with his fierce gaze. "What do you mean?"

I blinked, my head sinking into my shoulders. "I… I…"

"Did you see something?"

"Well, the noises from the water on Friday, that kind of sounded like cats screaming," I said, wondering why I hadn't been able to keep those thoughts to myself.

He didn't look away for a moment, as though he was trying to get into my head. "Alright," he said eventually. "Anyone else have something to add?"

When we were all silent, he told us to keep an eye out when we're out in the woods, and that dinner would be served in a few hours. He shut the door behind himself as he left.

Everyone turned on me right away.

"Was that what you really meant?" Cherry asked, a little pointedly.

"Did you see something when you went out for your phone?" Laurie asked, genuinely concerned.

I glanced at them both before saying softly, "I did see something when I was out there. On the beach, there was a big cat."

"We don't get mountain lions in Ontario, do we?" Cherry pondered to herself.

"I don't think it was a mountain lion. It looked more like a tiger," I said, swallowing.

"It could've come from a zoo," Laurie pondered.

"We might get big cats here," Abigail said, but I only seemed to hear her.

Cherry sighed and squeezed her arms. "This only adds to my point from before. These people, this place, it's all so weird. I don't think Ripley is wrong about this place being… Silent Woods, but I don't… I don't know what that means."

Abigail looked up at her calmly, picking up her knitting again. "It means it's Silent Woods. There's going to be weird things, you just have to accept it and work with it."

"This is real life, Abigail, not a fairytale," Laurie pleaded anxiously. "This is a normal camp and these people are normal. They're a little eccentric, but there's nothing weird, or magical, or made up. There's no such thing as Silent Woods."

She just smiled a bit, like she knew something that we didn't, which she did. So did I, but I wouldn't say a word.

"There's no need to get upset, Laurie…" Cherry whispered, a little stunned.

She wiped tears away furiously. "I can be upset about this. I came here to make normal friends at a normal camp. I don't want this."

None of us knew what to say. Laurie choked back a sob as she sprang up and stormed out, the door banging shut behind her.

Both Abigail and Cherry were talking now, accusing each other of making her run away. I couldn't hear a word they said, the meanings warping into noise. The bed and blankets felt funny under my body, and my clothes felt wrong, then ripped. The noises were different, they were panicking and saying things that must be referencing me, but all I could think of was the way she said she wanted normal friends.

My body was a river as I leaped off the bed, dull claws

skittering on the wood floor. Cherry was between me and the door. I raised my tail and fluffed out my heavy ruff, staring her right in the eyes. Was that a moment of fearful realization crossing her face as I crossed the room, pushing right past her?

Yes, it was. I am the wolf in the woods. I am the wolf with the human eyes.

My heart was thundering in my ears as I galloped across the wet grass, stopping at the fire circle, perching on a log. I scanned the area, looking for shadows and shapes that looked human. It was hard to see through the rain, and these eyes weren't the best anyway, so I used my ears and nose. Between the wailing wind and pattering rain and lapping shore, there was the sound of someone crying. Between the wetness of wood and the freshness of the grass and the storminess of the sky, there was her shampoo. It made me feel both silly and creepy to know that smell, to follow it to the cliff on the opposite side of the island from our cabins.

I suppose I should've understood the fear in her eyes when she saw me, but it broke my heart just a bit.

She jumped up, backing away, her whole body shaking. "Please, please don't hurt me," she whimpered.

I lowered my head and tail, pricking up my ears and looking at her, trying desperately to convey that it was me. Her friend. Oh, I hope.

When she realized she was backed against the cliff, I could smell the panic rolling off her in waves. I had to do something quickly to get her to know I wasn't dangerous. Flopping down, I rolled onto my back, kind of hating how the rain soaked through my soft fur. But as I stretched out my neck and stared at her shoes, upside down across the grass, I didn't mind the way the water chilled me to the bone.

"What… Are you… Doing?" she asked slowly. She waited a while to approach, but when she did, I wagged my tail.

We were suspended like this for a long time: her too afraid to get closer, me too afraid of scaring her to move. I wanted to curl around her and warm her up. She was shivering so bad. Silly thing had come out here in just a shirt, leggings, and shoes. She'd be drenched by dinnertime.

"You must be hurt, or sick," Laurie mumbled after a while. "Oh, maybe I am. I'm talking to a wolf. You can't even understand me, can you?"

I rolled onto my belly and, taking this wild chance, nodded.

She froze, studying me.

I begged her silently to recognize my eyes.

"Did you just say yes?"

I nodded again, giving her a toothy canine smile, tongue lolling out.

She looked dizzy and had to sit down. "I… I'm dreaming. This isn't real."

I whined softly and shook my head side to side. I waited a moment before I stood and walked over to her slowly, watching her body language. She didn't seem afraid of me, but she was afraid. I understood. I sat beside her, staring at her until she looked me in the eyes.

"Oh," she mouthed, some kind of realization crossing her face, too.

Slowly, I leaned closer until she let me rest my chin on her shoulder. We stayed there for a moment, suspended, alone.

"Should we go back? To the cabin, I mean?"

I left out a puffy breath and wagged my tail. We stood together. As we crossed the grass in silence, her hand on my shoulder, the rain stopped. At the door, she waited for me just inside as I

shook myself out. I stepped into the cabin and Laurie closed the door carefully. They all watched me change. I wondered what it looked like.

Abigail was ready with new clothes for me: a shirt and shorts I'd left on my floor. She had folded them neatly and put them on my bed for me. She was the only one brave enough to open my curtain to let me change in privacy.

"I figured it would be rude to look for anything else," she said quietly. "I'll repair the clothes you had been wearing."

"Thank you," I said breathlessly from behind my curtain, dressing myself at the speed of light. I felt shame like cold sweat all over my body. "I'm sorry for this."

"Don't worry about it," Abigail said. "I understand."

"What do you mean, you understand?" I asked, fear in my voice as I slowly opened the curtain.

She shrugged a bit, her hair falling off her shoulder. "I knew."

"What? How?" I pressed myself against the wall, becoming aware of the way the other two girls looked at me. Like I wasn't a person.

"I can speak to and influence animals," she said simply.

I blinked. "I'm not an animal."

Her eyes widened a bit. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to suggest that. You're a person, above all… A werewolf, right? I can influence you a bit because of that, because you're partially not human."

I growled. "I am human. I'm normal."

"But you are a werewolf, Morgan."

"Yes," I said seethingly, baring my teeth, "but I am normal."

"You're a werewolf?" Cherry interrupted. Without looking at her, I could hear the smile in her voice. "And you go to my school, so you live near me, right? So you must have been…"

My eyes rolled in my head to see her. My muscles were stiff, ready for anything. "Why does that matter?"

"You were the wolf I saw," she said, "with the human eyes, when I was younger, when Ronnie got mad at me."

"That doesn't matter." I could feel my insides vibrating. I didn't know what to do.

Laurie stammered, stepping a little closer to me, "Maybe we should stop…"

A low, pained whimper was all I could add.

"I could help," Abigail offered, but I growled loudly at her.

"I'm not an animal and I will not be treated like one," I said, anger making my voice shake, but my words were startlingly articulate. "I'm a person. I'm your friend… At least I thought I could be. But if you only see me as feral, or a monster, or something to pick apart, I'd rather be alone than be your toy."

They were all silent after that. Tinnitus rang in my ears. Without meeting any of their eyes, I turned and walked out of the cabin. The door slammed shut behind me, pulled by the wind that filled my mind with its white noise.

Chapter Twenty-One (Ronnie)

"So, have you always been a vampire?" Ripley said, perched on the ladder of the bunk bed, swinging his legs. He had a huge smile on his face.

I leaned back against the wall, my bed creaking as I adjusted my crossed legs. "Yeah. My mother is a vampire, so I was born like this."

"Was she always a vampire, or was she bit?"

I shrugged, watching the vent stir the curtain between the two beds on the back wall. "She never talks about that kind of thing."

"Is the biting thing even real?"

"You tell me, dude. I've never bit anything aside from that squirrel…" I sighed. "That was a feed, anyway. I don't know how to turn, if I even can."

"You'd think your mom would warn you about that kind of thing," he said thoughtfully. "But from my research, there are different types of vampires, and if you were born a vampire, then you wouldn't be able to turn anyone because you can reproduce."

"That's a weird way of putting it, but cool," I said, trying to be optimistic. Even with Barclay out helping the counselors clean the kitchen, this made me nervous. I understood my status

as a person in Ripley's eyes, but the idea that Barclay could come back at any time, and the fact that these things were being spoken about truly and freely, made my skin crawl.

"I think it's very interesting," he said happily. "Vampires who can turn people aren't able to reproduce, but their bodies aren't dead. Is your body dead?" He pursed his lips. "I'm sorry, that's a bit invasive, isn't it?"

I laughed a bit. "Don't worry, it's fine. No, I don't think my body is dead… My pulse is slow and my blood has trouble getting to my extremities, I don't really need to sleep, and I can survive a long time without needing to breathe, but I don't think I'm dead."

"That sounds mostly alive to me!" He reached into his bed to get his book, flipping to the page he'd bookmarked with a pencil. He scribbled something down. "But you said your mom is a vampire, right? You didn't mention your dad…?"

"He's not," I said a little dismissively. "He's a human."

"So you're only half vampire."

I nodded.

He wrote, looking very focused. "Is your mom's body dead?"

"No, we have the same, like, body type," I said. "I need food that isn't blood, and I need to breathe more often than she does. My blood is a little more, I don't know, like a human's. I can also handle sunlight for a little longer and I don't get hurt as bad, and my garlic allergy just gives me hives. It makes her anaphylactic."

"Does she have an EpiPen?"

"No, she just needs to drink lots of blood after."

"Is blood your catch all medicine?"

I nodded. "Pretty much. I've never taken other meds, honestly, not even Advil."

His eyes widened and he kept writing. "What about when you get a cold?"

"Oh, I don't get sick. Aside from what I've mentioned, you know, the sun and garlic. And if I, like, eat moldy food, but I can eat raw meat."

"That's neat. A little gross, but neat," he said, smiling and flipping the page. "What about religious imagery?"

"What?"

"Like, are you hurt by crosses and Holy Water?"

I snorted. "No, that's a myth. But vampires can get… Really scary if we want to. We can shapeshift, and I'm sure people would freak out in general if somebody looks undead and has fangs."

He nodded, pursing his lips as he wrote. "That makes a lot of sense, actually. Do you think that's universal for vampires, or is it just something for your species? It is species, right? It wouldn't be breed," he added with a disgusted face.

I shrugged. "I don't know, and you'd know the difference better than I would. I'm no scientist, but I'd say breed is closer, but I'm not a dog."

"Breed isn't right at all, that's used for a specific group of breedable domestic animals," he said as though reciting. "Race is used for humans, so I guess race would work?" He tapped his pencil on the page for a moment, shaking his head and laughing a bit. "What a weird conversation, even for me. Thank you for doing this with me, Ronnie. I really appreciate it. I don't have a lot of people who listen to me, and when they do, it's kind of out of pity. You and Cherry and maybe Barclay are the only people who've ever believed me."

I smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of my neck. "It's not a problem, Ripley. And it's not pity. I appreciate you helping me

too… I… I don't know things about myself and my world and I don't think anyone else will be there to teach me."

"Well, it's a good thing I know a whole lot," he said cheekily. "So, you have medicine to show me, don't you?"

"I do. Let me just get it," I said, picking up my bag and putting it on the bed beside me. "You can tell me where these come from, or maybe how they're made, right?"

"I can surely try."

As I opened the pocket that held the pill bottles, the door swung open. I jumped and the bottles slipped out of my hands, clattering to the floor, their caps popping off. Pills scattered across the floor.

"Oh my goodness, what's going on?" Barclay gasped in the doorway.

"Oh no your blood pills!" Ripley exclaimed, tossing his book down and hurrying to gather the pills from the floor.

"Don't call them that," I hissed, dropping to my knees and trying to collect them myself.

"His what pills?"

"Blood pills," Ripley answered innocently, not entirely paying attention to his words or the situation, distracted by the mess. "He's a vampire, he needs them."

Barclay laughed sharply, but made a beeline for the bathroom, saying, "I hope you find them quick because I have to do my shot today."

Shocked, I just gathered them all up and shoved them back into my bag. Barclay wasn't doing anything more than taking his vial out of the cabinet, so all I had time to do was shoot Ripley a seething look.

"What?" he mouthed, then his face went flat. He realized what he'd said. "Oh gosh Ronnie I'm so sorry I wasn't thinking—"

"It's alright, drop it," I hissed, checking again that my bag was zipped and safe.

"But I said it and Barclay knows now it's dangerous I—"

"Forget it and he will too—"

"But you said it's so imp—"

Barclay cleared his throat. "Unless you guys are, like, gonna watch me… I'd like to have the cabin to myself."

We stopped talking at each other and looked up at him. Ripley's hands were shaking as he tried not to look like he was going to cry. My face was on fire and my heart was hammering in my chest. Honestly I just wanted to forget this happened for my own sake.

I stood up first, putting on my hat, jacket, and sunglasses. "I'm gonna go see what Cherry's up to."

"I'm going to explore the beach," Ripley announced, springing to his feet and grabbing his book. "I've been meaning to since Friday. I hope the rain didn't mess anything up too much…"

"Good luck," Barclay said to him pleasantly. "Let me know if you find anything cool."

"Oh, I've found tons cool!" he squeaked. "But it's still, uh, it's in the works, so I can't talk about it yet."

I sucked at my teeth nervously, standing just outside the cabin, holding the door open for him. When we were both outside and out of earshot, he whispered an apology. I waved it off. I wished he was a little better at self control, but he tried and he was taking this seriously. That's all I could ask of him.

As Ripley ran down to the beach, I walked over to the girls' cabin and knocked. Cherry answered the door.

"Oh I'm so glad to see you," she said exasperatedly. "So much is happening. I was just about to come find you."

Inside, I noticed Abigail looking concerned and upset, but

Cherry was outside with the door tightly shut before anything could be said.

"What's up?" I asked, looking her up and down. She was outwardly looking the same as always, colorful and proud, but her eyes were different. Anxious.

"Let's walk in the woods," she said, almost running around the cabin to get to the shade of the forest. I followed her as fast as I could. We didn't talk until we were several feet into the trees, which made me a little anxious too.

After an annoyingly long time, I stopped. She took a few steps before noticing and turning, a confused look on her face.

"What's going on?" I asked firmly before she could speak.

"Remember that werewolf I saw in the woods? Of course you do… But do you remember the eyes?" The words bubbled up in her; I could see how excited she was by the way she shook her hands and couldn't hide a smile.

I tried, for the sake of how good her happiness made me feel, to not look as emotionally flattened as I felt. "Yeah, I do."

"They were human," she said, and I saw that night all over again.

She and I were sitting on my bedroom floor, listening to her favorite music on my laptop. A plate of crackers and a couple glasses of lemonade were sitting untouched on my desk. Her knees were scuffed, she had leaves in her hair, and her eyes were bright with adventure. I remembered how angry I felt when she told me that wolf's eyes had been human, surely, they must have been!

I remembered finding it hard to talk to her for the next few days, and then spending years erasing her from my life.

Focusing my eyes on her face, taking in the familiarity of her features and the joy in the crinkle of her smiling eyes, I nodded.

"They were."

She seemed taken aback for a moment, but didn't miss a beat. "Wolves don't have human eyes, but you know what does?"

"Werewolves," I said, feeling a glimmer of her excitement in my own chest.

"Yes!" she squeaked, wiggling her arms. "And you'll never believe this, Ronnie, but guess what?"

"What, we have werewolves here?" I said, trying to not sound like I was humoring her.

"You're joking, I can tell you're teasing me, but that's exactly it, I found a werewolf," she gloated. "Well, she kinda jumped on me. Almost."

"She?"

"Morgan!"

"What? No way. I don't believe you." I couldn't deal with losing her over this kind of thing, not again, but even if I could allow myself to not be the only magical thing about the world, this was too close to home. Morgan had a face and a name and was a girl I knew. I'd had her in one or two of my classes, I'm sure. She was a little quiet and clumsy but that didn't make her anything special.

Cherry's voice betrayed her hurt. "Oh come on, Ronnie… We've come so far since—"

"That's not what this is about," I sighed sharply, cutting her off. "I'm not scared of being the freak anymore. It doesn't matter that I'm a vampire because yeah this place is full of weird shit so I can't be alone in that."

Something about the way she held herself scared me into shutting my mouth. She seemed to be collapsing in on herself.

Oh no. Did I just…?

"That was… Out loud, wasn't it?" I mumbled breathlessly.

She nodded, whimpering softly. "You're a…"

"Vampire. I'm a vampire." I let out a deep sigh, rubbing the back of my neck and sucking hard at my teeth.

For the next two or three minutes, I watched her reasoning with herself. Eventually she came to a conclusion that made her shoulders slump.

"Oh no, Ronnie… That's why we… You didn't want to talk to me for so long… Were you scared I was gonna treat you different?"

I didn't stop sucking at my teeth until I lost feeling in my lips. "I was afraid of being a game to you. I was afraid of not being a person to you."

"You're always a person to me. You're always a friend." She frowned sympathetically. "Don't call yourself a freak."

Locking my eyes on the ground, I tried to make sense of this in my head. This was years of silence opened up and on the table between us. This was my most protected secret, full of my worst fears. This was still ignoring my deeper problem, though.

"I had no idea… I didn't even think to ask…" She hugged her arms, looking me up and down. "I didn't even think that someone so close to me could be… You know… What I was looking for in the woods. But Morgan, she's a werewolf, she's the werewolf I saw… This isn't that far-fetched, you being a vampire and being my best friend."

My chest felt warm at the idea of still being her best friend. "That makes sense," I mumbled, putting it in perspective for myself. If I could be a vampire and go to school with hundreds of normal kids and make sure that none of them find out what I am, who's to say Morgan couldn't hide being a werewolf in the same situation?

But that was still overlooking something. Something that I

couldn't block out forever. The reason I'm not entirely shutting down the idea of not being the only nonhuman in the world.

"I'm glad you waited to tell me," she said after a while. "Or, well, didn't accidentally tell me earlier. I wouldn't have seen you any different, but my social skills weren't too good in middle school…"

"Whose were?" I laughed, shaking my head. "I didn't want to do that to you, Cherry. I wanted to be your friend, I just… I was so scared I would've been a game to you. But Ripley knows, I told him by accident too, and he even treats me well. I don't know why I didn't tell you sooner, honestly, knowing that."

She giggled and stuck her tongue out at me. "You're gonna end up telling the whole camp you're a vampire by accident, aren't you?"

"Hey, I'm under a lot of stress keeping this quiet. Ripley's really nosy."

She sighed shakily, smiling warmly. "Oh, come here… Can I hug you?"

I choked out a whimper, my stomach fluttering. "Of course," I said, closing the distance between us and letting her hold me.

"You can hug me too, dumbass."

I laughed into her shoulder and put my arms around her back.

"You mean a lot to me, you know."

"You do too."

We walked back to our cabins slowly, talking about how Morgan definitely does act like a wolf all the time. She also told me about how smart Abigail is, and mentioned as an afterthought that she can control animals. I didn't think that was an afterthought, but I kind of appreciated how relaxed she was about this. As we were getting close, she told me, a little flustered, that she'd made a gift for Laurie and desperately

hoped she would still like it after the whole Morgan thing.

"Why wouldn't she?"

"I got a little… Awkward about Morgan being the werewolf I saw. Laurie defended her and got a bit upset," she explained worriedly. "I like her a lot… I hope she still likes me."

"I'm sure she does," I said. "That situation doesn't just, you know, happen to everybody all the time. Tensions were high. You should apologize to both of them and explain your actions."

She nodded, looking down. "Thanks, Ronnie…"

"Make sure you tell Laurie you like her too," I quipped, jabbing her in the arm playfully.

"What? No, I'm not doing that," she snorted.

"Why not?"

She shrugged her shoulders, smiling nervously. "I'm just not gonna."

"That's not a good answer. Tell her!"

"But what if it makes things weird? She might not like me at all, let alone… Like me."

"What if she does, though? What if you don't tell her and we all split up when the summer's over?" Quietly, I wondered if that would happen to me if I didn't ever talk to Barclay. The shameful part of me didn't mind that possibility.

Cherry really pondered that for a moment, walking up to the back of the cabin and leaning against the wall. "But what if she doesn't like girls?"

I sucked at my teeth. "That's a good point… I'd still ask her. You never know unless you take a chance, and it could be a really good thing," I said, then sighed softly. "You know, during the time we didn't talk, I was dating someone. When we started dating, I knew I liked guys but I thought I liked girls too, but it was just because I really liked this person. Only a few months

into our relationship, he turned out to be a guy too. Things got a lot better, and that wouldn't have happened if he didn't take a chance and tell me who he really was."

"But you're single now, aren't you?"

"Not everything works out forever," I mumbled. "That doesn't mean this isn't worth a try."

She paused, then nodded. "Thank you again, for real, Ronnie. I'm… Not making any promises, but I'll think about it."

I grinned. "That's what I like to hear. Tell me how it turns out, okay?"

She looked away shyly and laughed to herself. "Okay. I'll see you soon, I'm gonna go talk to them."

I waved goodbye as she hurried inside, then I wandered around the open area for a while. I had no idea how long Barclay would need, or if he was still in there. Since it's an injection, I figured I shouldn't knock, in case he was in the middle of something sensitive and I startled him. As I was sitting down on a log to wait, he opened the door and saw me. For a moment, he smiled.

I jumped up, nervous butterflies making me springy. "Hey Barclay, how'd it go?"

"Smoothly. I'm used to it by now. Thank you for waiting." He waited by the door for me as I came over.

"Speaking of that, could you, like, text me and Ripley when you're finished? I don't want to knock and scare you, but if we leave the door open critters will get in and it's not very good privacy."

"Of course," he said. "I was going to do that if I couldn't find you two. How was your walk?"

"Good," I said, trying not to look visibly distressed. I knew it was hypocritical to not follow my own advice, but I wasn't

ready yet. I could always plant the seed now, though, so I could be held accountable. I took a deep breath. "Hey, Barclay… I've been thinking and I really do want to get to know you again. I want to properly make up for what happened and be friends again for real."

He titled his head. "I figured we were friends again. I was giving you space. You seem very tense around me."

I laughed anxiously. "It's because I feel bad."

His face softened. "Don't. I forgive you." He smiled a bit. "I would like to talk more, though. In general, not about anything specific."

I had to contain my smile to a reasonable degree of excitement and relief. "Oh, that's great, I, uh… Thank you. We can talk and hang out whenever you want. Text me? Or just talk to me? You know where I sleep," I tried to make a joke to cover up how flustered I was.

He laughed, but not at me. "I will. Don't worry about a thing. I'll see you tonight at dinner," he said, then walked off to the main hall.

I watched him go for an embarrassing minute, then hopped inside. My anxiety became a different, slightly more sickening anxiety as I found my phone and called Mom without giving myself time to hesitate.

I had to do this. I had to.

Ring, ring.

I couldn't put it off all summer. Not with the changes happening so suddenly.

Ring, ring.

Not with two people knowing now, not with my questions all coming to the same dead end.

Ring—

"Hello my darling son, I've missed you so much! How are you doing?"

I laughed a bit, somehow making the fear worse. "Hi Mom. I've missed you too. I'm doing good, really good. How are you?"

"Oh, lonely, but that's okay. Tell me about your camp. Are you making friends?"

"Yeah, it's cool. I reconnected with Barclay, he's here too, and Cherry's here. I've made a good friend aside from them too. His name is Ripley and he's really fun."

"I'm so glad to hear that. Barclay's that boy you dated, right? But he moved away and you lost touch. It's good you found him. Such a sweet kid."

"Yeah," I mumbled, trying to stay on track. "The camp itself is pretty nice. We're on an island and it gets chilly at night. The bugs are awful, according to my friends. We've done a bunch of silly activities like making up a play in an hour and putting it on for the counselors, but I'm really good at the physical stuff like when we do tag or relay races in the woods."

"There's woods on the island?"

"Yeah, it's big."

"That all sounds very nice and good for you. How are you holding up? Any trouble with the pills?"

"Mostly I'm okay… I had to feed, though. Nobody saw." At this point, I was trying not to choke on my own tongue. "A squirrel. It… I got… All of it."

"Oh," she breathed, speaking in a hushed, sorry tone. "I'm sorry, my darling son. I never prepared you for that. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay… It was shocking when it happened but I'm okay now."

"You could've called. I would've supported you."

"I've had support," I said tensely, "from my friends."

Silence, for a long time. Then, like ice, "How many?"

"Two."

"What do they know?"

"One of them knows everything. He's very, very trustworthy."

"Barclay?"

"No. Ripley."

"He's a stranger to me."

"Mom, it wasn't my choice to tell him. I got scared and it came out and I know him well enough to judge that he's safe knowing."

"What about us? Are we safe?"

"Yes, Mom, we're safe. Please trust me."

Silence again, then, softly, "Okay. I know you wouldn't lie. You're a smart, good kid. I love you."

"I love you too." I said. "The other is Cherry."

"Okay. She's okay to know."

"I know," I sighed. "But I have questions for you, Mom."

"Do you?" There was an accusation in her voice.

"My father is human. You're a vampire. Who are your parents, Mom?"

All I heard from her was a sharp inhale.

Swallowing my fear, I went on. "I know we're not the only vampires. That doesn't make sense because you have parents… We're not the kind of vampire that turns people. We have kids. So you have parents who are vampires."

I wanted to give her a minute to respond, but she was still quiet.

"I know we're not the only nonhumans in the world because there's a werewolf girl here, and a girl who can talk to animals, and my friend, a complete stranger before this summer, already

knew more about what I am than you ever bothered to tell me."

She whimpered. Maybe that was a little harsh. I couldn't stop now, though.

"So can you tell me, Mom, why I try so hard to pretend miserably that I'm alone in the world, why I never lie to you, but you can't even tell me the truth about what we are?"

I was expecting silence, but she answered immediately and coolly. "Because, Ronnie, my parents would rather see you dead than accept that I was in love with your father before he left us."

So it was my turn to be quiet. I felt my throat squeeze and my face get hot, so I sat down and clamped my free arm over my legs.

"When he and I first got together, I stopped speaking to my family. My parents are all I ever had, until he brought me to the city and taught me how to live out here. He took care of me for a while," she paused, her voice wavering, "but his drinking got out of control when I had you. I was young and I'd been isolated on my family's farm for a long time."

"Wait, you lived on a farm?"

"Why do you think we only feed on livestock?" There was a smile in her voice. "That's all I knew how to do… Your father promised to show me the world and I was so naive that I believed him. All of that, the promises and the protection and the love and the understanding, it all fell apart when he figured out what I am. What we are, Ronnie."

I let out a shaky breath. My head felt like it might explode.

"He left in the middle of the night when you weren't quite three. I had taken you out for a walk in your stroller. When we came home, it was like it was a whole different house. You thought we had the wrong apartment."

I remembered that. It was terrifying and disorienting. It

turned my whole life around.

"You tell the story like a joke, I know this because I've gotten calls from the school about it," she went on, "but don't worry, I'm not upset. And it wasn't your fault. It was mine."

"No, it wasn't you," I said stiffly. I had to put a lot of effort into not squeaking from how much I wanted to cry. "Mom, it wasn't you or me or us, it was him. We are not at fault for being who we are, he's wrong for being hateful and ignorant and afraid."

"Thank you," she whispered, surprised, after a moment. "Thank you, my wonderful son."

She didn't need to thank me, but I didn't need to tell her that. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too. It's okay."

"What do you mean?"

"It's okay that you told your friends. And you're right… It's my responsibility as your mother to teach you these things. I should've told you all this a long time ago. I didn't know if you were ready to hear it… I wasn't, not when it happened and not until… Not until now."

I considered that, if she had told me when I was younger, and she was right. I would've blamed myself. I never would've blamed her, but I think even a week ago it would have been too much for me to handle.

"After he left," Mom continued, collecting herself, "I needed help. My parents were still all I had in the whole world… They told me it was you or them, Ronnie. They said they wouldn't have a halfbreed in their life. So you became my world."

I flinched when tears hit my arm. I hadn't realized I was crying, then I sobbed.

"Oh no my son, please don't cry… It's okay. I don't resent

that choice. It took no thought. You're more important than anything. I don't want to lose you…"

The force of those words made my body shake. That's why she'd been so upset before I left for camp. She didn't want to lose me.

"Is that why you were scared when that… Person… Thing," I mumbled, trailing off, hoping she'd get the point.

She sighed, and when she spoke, there was something different in her voice. "Yes. Yes, I was scared."

"What was that, Mom?" I asked, my voice shaking with fear.

She took a long time to answer. "I don't know how to tell you this, Ronnie."

"Tell me what?" I managed. I wasn't going to let this slide. I'd had enough confusion and secrecy for a lifetime.

"How… That…" she struggled for a few moments, then, "It's difficult for me too, Ronnie. What happened was… A look at how dire the situation is. The risks to your health."

"I wasn't even hurt," I muttered. "You acted like it was a huge deal but I've been beaten up badly before."

"It was a huge deal," she said. "You told me you couldn't explain what you did. I know what that means, Ronnie. I know. You got close to revealing our secret. I was afraid for our lives." She sighed, a crackly sound over the phone. "But you didn't. Even if you shifted, you didn't. There was nobody, nothing, there to reveal anything to."

All I could say was, "What?"

"I smelled nothing on you when you came in. There was no monster. No human. You didn't see anything."

But I did, I wanted to tell her. I saw that horrible thing, darker than the darkness around it, glistening with sweat. Maybe my eyes could be tricked, but it pushed me to the ground. If it

hadn't, I wouldn't have shifted.

But no noise could come out of my mouth.

Softly, she said, "One thing I learned about your father, the one thing that ever made me feel just a tiny bit that he would not be a good father to you is, that he had…" She sighed in a tired and pained way. "These episodes. He would go off sometimes, not for very long, but he would say he couldn't be around me, because he… Oh, Ronnie, I don't know how to tell you this. But you need to know. I didn't think it could happen to you but it has, my dear son. He would, would see things sometimes. Hear things, voices that would make him feel unsafe. He would go to stay with his family while he went through it." A pause. "It was okay. There was only one time where it wasn't, when he thought someone followed him home, and it was… Much like what happened to you, my dear, dear son."

No. That didn't make sense. I've always guessed I have depression, sure, but… No. I'm normal. I'm not a freak, I've finally come to terms with being a blood sucking horror film monster, I can't be… I can't have…

Wait.

Suddenly, all together, it clicked. The paranoia I'd been feeling since that night. The fear of going out that I'd always chalked up to fear of getting sick, that had gotten worse too. The blurry shapes I'd been seeing when I got stressed. And what about the panic attacks I'd had, like when I thought the sign up form for the camp knew I was a vampire? I'd assumed that was just hunger, but…

"How could you have not told me?" I snapped, my voice way too loud. "I've been living in a nightmare for weeks! Why did you never think that I should know you think I'm—?!" I drew a ragged breath. "And wh-what about the rest of my medical

history? Should I not know about that, Mom? I'm losing my mind and you could have prevented all of this by taking me to a doctor or," my voice caught as I sobbed, "or even just telling me anything."

"Ronnie, what do you think a doctor would tell you? I know you've just found out you're not alone in the world, and I never should have made you feel like you had nobody else, but that's the reality I live in. I have nobody else to turn to if something happens to you. If you get sick, I don't know what to do but feed you blood and those pills I taught myself to make. For you. I can't trust anyone else because we will both be killed if the wrong people find out, and not everywhere is as special as this camp apparently is, because I can promise that everyone I have ever known is the wrong person." Her voice crackled out as she ran out of breath, then she started again, gentler. "I'm sorry. I am truly so, so sorry. I had no other choice, my precious son."

"I'm sorry," was all I could say.

"I forgive you, Ronnie. It's been a nightmare for me too. I want it to be over now."

I went quiet again. I had spent so long accusing her of hiding things from me without even considering her reasons. None of this was fair, but it felt better having spoken. I could breathe.

"All of this should've been clear between us before. I'm sorry for keeping you in the dark," she said sadly. "I wish I hadn't broken your trust."

All of the fear I'd felt when she had gotten mad at me before I left for the camp, all the panic and confusion of those last few days, it was all fading. She was treating me with the respect she'd given me my whole life. I wasn't losing her after all.

Instead of speaking, I just cried. She comforted me softly over the phone until I could manage to tell her I forgive her and

I appreciate all that she's done for me.

Ripley walked in, wincing when he saw me. "Oh no," he said, "is this a bad time?"

I wiped my face on my sleeve and laughed a bit. "Sorry Mom, my friend came in."

"Oh goodness right, you're sharing a room, aren't you?" She giggled, traces of sadness still in her voice. "I'll let you go now… It's getting late, I hope you're getting dinner soon."

"Yeah, it's dinner," I said, then looked at Ripley.

He nodded.

"I'll be starting something for myself soon," she said wistfully. "I'm on my own again… Until you're back, that is."

"Oh," I said, not wanting to cut her off but not wanting to leave Ripley standing there.

"Yeah, he wasn't worth my time anyway," she said playfully. "Well, enjoy your evening, Ronnie. I love you. And say hi to your friend for me."

"I love you too, Mom. I will," I said, then she hung up. I put my phone down and took off my jacket.

"Is everything okay?" Ripley said, concerned.

I nodded. "Very okay. My mom says hi." I grabbed a clean jacket from beside my bed, shook myself out, and walked over to him. "What's for dinner?"

He started walking back to the main hall. "Chicken burgers," he said.

I followed him. "Oh, gross."

"You don't like chicken?"

"Bird blood tastes bad."

He looked up at me, a little shocked that I was talking about that out in the open.

I smiled at him, showing my fangs. "Good thing there's no

blood in chicken burgers."

Chapter Twenty-Two (Morgan)

The rays of the setting sun were warm on my thick fur, but they were becoming hard to catch through the trees. I paced in the area behind our cabins, not close enough to be seen or heard, but not far enough that it would take me too long to come back. If I wanted to come back, that is.

Maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I'd wander out past the orange line, or wait until after twilight to cross that long bridge all on my own. Maybe I'd disappear into these strange woods, and into the memories of these people.

What was left for me here, really? They'll think I'm a wild animal, if they already don't. Nobody will ever want to talk to me once they all know. The girls will push me away like kids at school always have. I'll be sent home to suffer quietly as Mommy's ungrateful son, watching Pa slip deeper into his depression, watching Trace struggle through school because nobody listens when the guidance counselors and therapists and specialists tell us he has ADHD.

Nobody listens to me.

Some days it's almost as though I don't have a voice.

Footsteps behind me made me stop. I fluffed up the fur on my shoulders and turned, ears pricked up, tail raised. My eyes focused on the short, awkward girl and I relaxed. Only a bit,

but I did relax.

"Hi," Laurie said uncertainly. "This is… You are Morgan, right?"

I nodded and sat, watching her steadily.

She laughed nervously, speaking in a relieved tone, "Oh good, when I was coming out here I was worried I'd end up talking to a random wolf."

I tilted my head to the side a bit, not breaking eye contact.

"I knew you'd be a wolf," she said, gently touching a curl of her brown hair, "because you didn't take your phone. But where are your clothes? You ripped them apart when you didn't take them off before you… Transformed?"

I held her gaze for a few seconds longer before standing and walking a few paces to the rock. Sniffing it, I pushed the leaves around the edges of the stone before looking up at her.

"Under there? Oh, you probably have a bag. That's clever." She smiled a bit, studying me quietly for a minute. "You look nice as a wolf. Have you ever seen yourself like this?"

I was a bit put off by her compliment. She must be trying to weasel her way into getting something from me, or preparing me for a fake apology. I answered her, though, shaking my head.

She pulled out her phone.

I bared my teeth.

"I'll delete it right away if you want," she said, sounding a little afraid. "And I won't show anybody either way. I promise."

Slowly, I hid my fangs again and looked down, lowering my ears a bit.

"It's okay," she said in a way I could only describe as cute, "you're scary but I trust you. Can I take a photo? Oh, are you posing for me?" She giggled a bit as the flash lit up the area.

I turned back to her, eager to see. She crouched down beside me. I was reminded again just how small she is, and how big I am.

Turning the screen to me, she let me see the photo: in it was a youthful but thickly furred wolf, whose coat was earthy brown with a hint of black around the ruff. Just like my hair. The eyes were the same as mine, intense and almost amber.

After a moment, Laurie tapped the image and moved her thumb to delete it. I bumped her arm with my nose urgently. She stopped, looking at me. We shared a silent agreement and she put her phone away.

She cleared a patch of dirt for herself to sit, then sat with her legs crossed, facing me.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't want to make you feel like you weren't my friend. I had no way of knowing that you're a werewolf, so it wasn't about you at all, but I understand that what I said hurt you."

I lowered my head a bit, watching her talking, ears up and listening. I wanted to trust her. What was keeping me from trusting her?

"It's okay if you don't forgive me, or want to be friends," she continued.

I interrupted her with a short, sharp whine.

She gave me a glimmering smile. "I'm glad… I still consider you my friend."

Happiness bubbled up inside me like a fountain of sunshine. I couldn't keep my tail from thumping softly against the ground. Laurie giggled and I was overcome with joy, wiggling my tail and haunches.

"You're just like a big dog, aren't you?" she said happily, reaching out a hand to touch my face.

I drew back a bit, more shy than offended, and she seemed to read that. She told me not to worry, that she didn't think it was weird. That she didn't think I was weird. That was a comfort in ways I couldn't quite explain, but I flinched when she tried to pet me. I stood suddenly, holding her startled gaze for a minute, then flicked my ears and glanced at the stone.

"Oh," she mumbled after a few seconds, "you want to change. Do you want me to leave?"

I nodded. She got up and left, brushing herself off as she went. I hoped I didn't offend her, but she did intrude on my time alone.

I didn't know yet if that was for the best.

When I had changed and gotten dressed again, I slowly made my way back to the cabin. I figured it would scare her too much to vanish tonight. I didn't want her to blame herself for my own shortcomings.

Curling up in bed, I shut my curtain and said nothing to my roommates. I was ready to pass out immediately, but my phone buzzed a few times. I rolled over and picked it up. The light blinded me for a minute, but when my eyes adjusted, I could see I had three texts. Who was texting me right now who couldn't just talk to me? Begrudgingly, I opened my messages to find that it was Trace, saying goodnight, and that he misses me, and that Mommy had yelled at him for sleeping with one of my shirts.

Trace: she said it was creepy and that im too old to be clingy like a little kid. she didnt take it away though. she hasnt gone in your room at all

I blinked away the water in my eyes, reading the texts over a few times. I wished I'd been there with him. I was glad she wasn't going in my room, but she had no right to harass Trace.

Morgan: It's not creepy. I honestly don't mind you doing that. Age doesn't work like that anyway, it's not like you suddenly don't need to be comforted because you're 12.

Morgan: I miss you too, dude.

Morgan: This place is great, but it would be better with you. How are you doing in summer school?

Trace: ty <3 <3 <3

Trace: im doing okay, my teacher lets me play on my phone when we r taking notes but people make fun of me for it. i told one kid my big sister would beat him up when she gets back from boot camp and he looked like he was gonna faint lol

Morgan: Don't go making a bad image of me :P You know I would though, if you asked nicely.

Trace: when are you gonna be back?

Morgan: Less than three weeks now.

I had typed and sent that before even thinking about it. I would be back to see him, right?

Trace: im so excited to see you again!!!

Morgan: Me too, dude.

Of course I would be. It's my choice.

With a fluttery sigh, I sent a final text.

Morgan: I've got something cool to tell you when I get home. Sleep well.

It's all my choice. I'm in control.

Chapter Twenty-Three (Ronnie)

It was about half an hour after ten, our curfew for the night, when Ripley texted me. I delicately opened my curtain to see him standing in the middle of the room, his face lit up by his phone. I waved my hand over my face and he closed his eyes so I could undress. Pushing the clothes toward him with my foot, I covered myself with my hands and whispered to him that I was ready. I watched him take a nervous peek as he stuffed my clothes into his bag before I transformed.

"Oh," he breathed, crouching down. "You're a dormouse. I expected a bat or a rat or something."

Internally, I rolled my eyes as I scurried into his open palms. He carried me out the door, his bag slung over his shoulder. I curled into a tight ball, clinging to his thumb. I felt so tiny and helpless… I'd never interacted with a person in this state before. Ripley's warm hand and steady gait kept me feeling safe, as long as I didn't look down.

He walked along the short, grassy path to Cherry's cabin, where she sat on the single step up to the door. When we got close, she stood up.

"Where's Ronnie?"

Ripley held his hand out to her. The force of the air moving around his hand made my little ears flap and my fur ruffle.

"That's a mouse," she said flatly, then her face lit up. "Oh! He can do that? That's so neat."

I squeaked loudly, looking up at Ripley.

"Ready to go down now?" he asked, smiling at me. He crouched down and let me crawl out into the grass, putting his bag down a safe distance away and unzipping it. He told Cherry not to look as he closed his eyes. I transformed back. Ripley was standing, facing me, with his arms outstretched and full of my clothes. I took them from him and scrambled to get dressed before the bugs ate my friends alive.

"Okay," I said, smoothing down my shirt. "Thanks. Sorry for squeaking at you, I still haven't gotten the hang of talking yet."

As Ripley pulled his book out, Cherry wasted no time in asking why I was a mouse.

"It was easier to sneak out if it just sounded like one person leaving," I said, swatting a mosquito away from my ear. "Go away, I have nothing for you," I hissed at it.

"You've got blood," Cherry asked with a frown, "right?"

"Kinda. I have the blood I've eaten over the past month or so in my body, but I naturally produce maybe a fifth of what I normal human does."

"That's…" Cherry trailed off, searching for a word. "So strange. Respectfully."

I laughed. "Don't worry about it."

Ripley, who had been jotting this all down, excitedly interrupted us. "Are you ready to hear what I found?"

"Of course," I said, instinctively trying to push up glasses that I wasn't wearing.

He smiled widely and hugged his book to his chest. "So, as you know, I was out in the woods earlier today, right before dinner. I was walking around investigating the area where those weird

noises happened. Remember on Friday? Yeah, I figured they came from the beach near the bridge, but that was pretty out in the open and I didn't want the counselors talking to me."

Cherry sighed a bit as she smacked a mosquito on her leg. "Could we walk and talk? And could I borrow some bug spray?"

"You didn't put any on?" I chided. "Come on, Cherry, you should know better, it's not like we don't get mosquitoes at home."

"I did," she pleaded. "It's just not strong enough, I guess."

Ripley dug through his bag and pulled out something similar to a tube of sunscreen. "Here, this should do the trick. It's like bug repellent cream."

She caught it as he tossed it to her, then spent a minute applying it before handing it back. We walked up a short path between the cabins and into the woods.

"As I was saying," Ripley went on as we followed the winding path through the trees, "I didn't like being in the open, so I went up the rise and into the forest. That's when things started getting weird. I found fur."

Cherry kicked a small rock out of our path. "So? There's animals here. It's nature."

Ripley stuttered a bit as he responded, saying, "Well, it wasn't, like, only fur, you know? Well, it was. It was just this fluffy gray clump of fur caught on some twigs. But around it there were big paw prints. They sort of looked like a lynx's paw prints."

"So there was a lynx," Cherry argued again, but she did sound interested. She was probably playing Devil's advocate or something, but I worried that Ripley wouldn't understand and would feel discouraged, so I asked what else about the scene made him think it was strange.

He brightened up right away. "Thank you for asking," he

said. "I spent a bit of time looking at the tracks themselves with my magnifying glass and a flashlight, but I didn't see anything weird there. When I was about to give up and brush it off as exactly what Cherry was saying, I noticed that the tracks were inexplicably joined by a set of boot prints."

Cherry nodded, looking impressed. "Yeah, that's definitely a weird find."

"The paws and the boots walked together for a long time," Ripley said, smiling excitedly. "We're getting close to where I found it now."

I looked around, scanning the forest floor for tracks. There were stones and fallen branches that looked like they'd been recently pushed about, but I couldn't find tracks yet. Taking a slow, deep breath, I could smell that something was off. It didn't smell exactly like cat, though. Maybe that's what lynx smells like?

"Oh, there they are," Cherry said, pointing down. A few feet ahead of us, big hiking boots walked beside large cat paws.

Ripley hurried ahead, walking along the edge of the path. He pulled a pencil from the front pocket of his overalls and held it in his teeth as he scanned the prints with a flashlight. Cherry and I followed him a little way behind. After a while, we'd gone pretty far in; I could even see a glimpse of orange in the distance.

I tapped Cherry on the arm and pointed at it. "You see that?"

She frowned. "Yeah… Should we tell him?"

Before I could respond, Ripley shot up and said, "Holy cow! You will not believe this!"

We watched as he whipped around and clambered back to us, taking large steps over branches and nearly clearing a bramble bush before he stopped in front of us. Breathless, he glanced

between us and his book before showing us the page. He had sketched a series of tracks like what we'd been seeing, but suddenly the boots were replaced by regular domestic cat paw prints.

"Did that just… Happen?" Cherry asked, dumbfounded.

He nodded, ecstatic.

I stared at the drawings for a while before saying, "Show me."

He led me to the place, a few paces ahead, where the boots became paws. I crouched down and looked beneath the nearby bushes, scrutinizing the ground and taking great care to not mess up any of the evidence.

"What are you looking for?" Ripley asked quietly.

"Clothes, or signs of clothes being taken off," I said, looking up at him. "I can't find anything, though. That doesn't make sense. If this person transformed like I can, they'd have to get undressed first, or else they'd either rip through their clothes or get caught in them."

"And that's natural, right? That's not a spell or magic?"

"My transformation is natural, yes."

Cherry, who had followed us and was standing a few feet behind Ripley, added that it was the case with Morgan too. "She tore her clothes up when she changed in front of me."

Ripley's eyebrows twitched. He looked over his shoulder at her. "What do you mean?"

I couldn't see her face, but I heard her distress in the way her breath caught in her throat.

Ripley smirked deviously and turned to me. "What does she mean, Ronnie?"

I swallowed hard and said, "Morgan's a werewolf."

Cherry smacked her forehead with her palm. "Great job, me."

Ripley couldn't contain a joyous giggle. "That's so cool, that's

really so cool, this place is so great…"

"Please don't say anything," Cherry begged, rubbing her face in exasperation.

"I won't, I promise," he said.

I looked up at him, my expression serious. "Double, triple, upside-down, banana split with whipped cream promise?"

He smiled so sudden and wide that his eyes seemed to disappear in the happy wrinkles of his face. "Double, triple, upside-down, banana split with whipped cream promise." He turned back to Cherry. "That means I'm super serious about it."

"Are you gonna tell her he knows now?" I asked.

She looked dizzy. "I suppose I've got to, don't I? It's her business who knows and who doesn't. I hope she's not too mad at me for slipping up…"

"I'll tell her with you," Ripley said warmly.

"Me too."

Her eyes widened. "Oh Ronnie she doesn't even know that you know. That's not good."

I sighed in mostly mock disappointment, but inside I felt a twinge of fear. If she was so able to slip up about these things, then that didn't give me much hope that she wouldn't go telling people about me. Considering the talk I had with Mom, and how people in general tend to take these things as a joke, and that I was already bullied for being a freak, I guess it couldn't hurt to have some good people now. People who'd believe me and trust me even knowing that I've killed something for its blood.

"Then I'll tell her that I'm a vampire."

The look I got from both of them made me feel like this was the bravest thing I'd ever done.

There was rustling behind us, to my right. I stiffened and

looked out into the undergrowth, but my vision was clouded by panic. The pieces were coming together in my mind: this was the thing that had left the prints, and it wasn't just an animal, but it had big claws and probably big teeth, and I couldn't do anything to protect myself, much less my friends, from whatever was coming.

Sharply shaped, glowing yellow eyes became visible through the brush, feeling like they were coming right at me. My muscles tightened. My fangs felt like they were growing. I knew they weren't, but it felt like it, it felt like being a wild animal. The air was electrified around me, whirling colors striking me. As the large cat let out a splitting snarl, a terrifyingly familiar feeling made me sick to my stomach. Just like waking up from a nightmare, but the monster was right in front of me and I had to fight.

I had to.

It should be coming naturally, with this awful lightning feeling. But all I could do was stare, mystified, as it got so close I could smell the rot on its breath.

As sudden as the appearance of the lynx, there came a loud, low roar. The four of us whipped around to face a huge grizzly. It rose onto its back legs, waving thick claws and baring massive fangs. I yelped and fell hard on my back, watching the bear drop down and charge, but not at us. It ran straight at the lynx; I saw the cat wheeling around and tearing off through the bushes, yowling in fear. The grizzly thundered after it and both were soon out of sight.

Cherry, Ripley, and I shared a look before the two helped me to my feet and we ran blindly back to the cabins.

Safely in the open in front of our cabins, we grouped together and didn't say a word. We checked each other for injuries and

somehow silently confirmed that we'd all seen what we had seen. After several still moments with the only sound being the lapping of the lake and the whirring of the bugs, Ripley very quietly coughed and pointed over to the adults' cabin.

Jason was standing there, looking disheveled beyond words. His hair was a mess, he had burrs stuck to his jeans, his flannel was tied haphazardly around his waist, and his glasses seemed to be on upside down. He noticed us looking and gave us an awkward wave before darting inside. When he uncrossed his arms to open the door, I saw three long, bleeding scratches on his forearm.

Chapter Twenty-Four (Morgan)

The morning after Laurie spoke with me in the woods, I woke up early, showered, and brushed my teeth for a very long time. I took care to not look at myself in the large mirror above the sink.

After breakfast, I hurried to help Jason and Shebal wash the dishes. Jason was wearing a long-sleeve shirt, even though the day was hot and the kitchen was hotter. He kept having to stand by the air conditioning because he'd nearly faint from the heat by the sink.

Eventually, Shebal gave him a concerned look when he returned from cooling off and said to him, "Jason, buddy… You should go take a shower and cool off or something. I'll get another kid to help with the cleaning."

Jason was very cold in his response, but he moved around the drying dishes before thanking him and heading out.

"I'll go see if one of the girls wants to help," I immediately offered. The tension between the two men was making it hard for me to breathe. Even though the air was pleasantly cool and the sun was comfortingly warm, I hurried across the grass to my cabin and opened the door.

Laurie and Cherry were standing by Cherry's bed, clutching her hand. There was a short trail of very small spots of blood

leading from the bathroom door to her bed, and there was a pocket knife on the ground. On her bed there was an unopened earbuds package that appeared to have been stabbed.

"Hold still, it might sting."

"Yeah, that stings," Cherry whispered, wincing as Laurie applied polysporin to her thumb.

Laurie held the tube in her mouth as she unwrapped a bandaid and gently placed it around the cut on Cherry's thumb.

She rubbed her hand delicately, thanking her sheepishly.

Laurie smiled as she took the tube from between her teeth. "Don't thank me, you were hurt and I did what was needed. Change that bandage every day or so. Wash the cut out and put more of this on when you do. You'll be fine, it'll just be sore for a while."

She thanked her again, asking how she knew all this.

Laurie laughed awkwardly and explained that her uncle taught her a bunch of first aid stuff because he was worried she'd get hurt, since she was deaf.

"That's not fair," she said. "Being deaf doesn't make you helpless."

She shrugged, but blushed. "They all worry. My aunts and uncles, anyway."

I watched Laurie squeeze the sides of the tube of polysporin to make the excess sink back inside before capping it. She busied herself with cleaning up the mess, giving Cherry a moment to notice me.

"Oh hi Morgan," she said, looking a little flustered. She was blushing quite a lot too.

"Hi," I said softly, hugging my arms. "I'd ask you to help with the dishes, but…"

She stumbled over an apology. I told her not to apologize

for an accident, especially like this. She laughed at herself for thinking it was smart to try to open a plastic package with a knife.

"Do you want me to try to open it?" I asked.

She blinked. I could see that she was trying not to ask a rude question, like if I would use my teeth or something. She just nodded.

Crossing the room with robotic movements, I picked up the package and examined it. The knife had made no more than a dent, leaving a weakened white line in the plastic. I folded it along the line, briefly tried to pull it apart, then just used my teeth. Cherry suppressed a giggle, but laughed out loud when I stuck my tongue out in disgust after I managed to tear it in half.

"Oh no, did you cut your tongue?" Laurie asked, appearing from the washroom.

I grimaced but shook my head. "Plastic just tastes bad," I said, wiping the package off on my leg. "Sorry for slobbering on your stuff…"

Cherry giggled. "It was cute."

Laurie blushed, but I didn't know why. I felt a little mocked.

I cleared my throat as I tossed the package gently at her bed. "Anyway… Laurie, do you want to help me with the dishes? Shebal needs extra help since Jason isn't feeling well."

"He isn't?" Cherry asked suspiciously, but her expression was suddenly very closed off. She whipped out her phone and urgently texted someone.

Laurie looked between us for a minute, then anxiously agreed. We hurried back out. Once we were in the kitchen, Shebal handed Laurie an apron and a scrub brush and got her started with washing the dishes. He told me I should put the dry ones away while he cleaned the stove top.

"So," I began sorting through the cutlery, "what was that with Cherry?"

"Oh, she just nicked her thumb trying to open that thing. She bled quite a bit and it was kinda scary but I knew what to do."

I glanced at her. She was staring intently at the soapy water.

"No, really, what was up with her? She seemed…"

Laurie's face turned as red as her shirt. "She said she likes me."

I paused, my hand hovering over the utensils drawer. "She does?"

"Yeah," she squeaked, scrubbing a plate frantically.

"Do you… Like her?"

She didn't answer, so I opened the drawer and put the spoons, forks, and knives away. The clattering made her jump. That made me feel bad. Angrily cleaning up was something I did at home to relax when Mommy was mean to me. It didn't feel fair to do this about Laurie.

"Are you upset?" she asked.

"No," I growled, flinging open the cabinet above my head.

"You're acting upset."

I shoved the plates away, trying not to focus on her. I was doing such a good job of not focusing on her that I didn't realize I had spoken out loud.

"You like me too," she breathed.

I didn't face her. The cabinet door remained between us. I couldn't face her, even without it. Maybe I misheard it. Maybe I didn't say anything after all. I kept putting dishes away. She kept washing dishes. When we were done, we were sent back.

We spent all day ignoring the words we may have not said.

That night at dinner, she sat beside Cherry. Abigail sat beside me on the opposite side. I ate quickly and got more than I was

hungry for, unable to look at them. As I cleared my second plate of stir fry, Jason's voice filled the room, booming in a way that was very unlike him.

"What are you hiding, Shebal?"

All eyes turned to the two men sitting alone across the room.

Shebal delicately put his fork down. "What do you mean?"

"You've been acting strange this whole time. Asking questions behind my back about dangerous cats, cats who shouldn't be here. Sneaking out at night, coming back with wet hair, smelling like the lake. What are you keeping from us?"

Something about him looked like a mirage. The memory of that soft yellow glow made my stomach hurt.

Jason rolled up his sleeve to reveal three long, red scratches on his arm. "I got this when I was walking in the woods. I was attacked by a lynx."

The silence in the large cafeteria was so intense it made my ears ring. They didn't seem to notice how loud they were being.

Shebal sighed softly, dismissing him. "We get Canada lynx here."

"It was a Siberian lynx."

"There are zoos nearby."

"Do you work for a zoo that's missing a Siberian lynx? Is that why you asked all the campers your ominous questions?" Jason's voice sounded more like a growl now. "No. You would have clarified. And if a zoo was missing a lynx, they'd call us. I'd know."

Shebal took a deep, shaky breath, closing his eyes. "I think you're getting a little too upset for this discussion, Jason."

"You are endangering these children and it is our responsibility to keep them safe," he said, leaning toward him a bit. He was a big and imposing person. As much as he was making a

good point, I felt sorry for Shebal.

"I'm not the one out there attacking anyone."

"But you obviously know something about this, and you're not saying anything. You need to tell us the truth. If I can get hurt, so can they, and you owe them the ability to be certain of their safety."

There was nothing between them for quite a while. I felt Abigail's presence strongly beside me, keeping me calm. Even though I knew she was using the animal part of my mind, I didn't take offense to it. Not this time.

Shebal stood up and walked out too quickly for Jason to stop him, saying, "Until you are ready to speak to me kindly and maturely, I will not be having this discussion."

Across the table, Laurie was shaking. Instinctively, I reached a hand out to her. She took it, but she let go when Jason told us quietly to leave.

I stayed at the back of the group, holding the door for everyone and gently closing it behind me. I slipped into our cabin without a word. I opened my curtain, content to go to sleep this early, but Laurie stopped me.

"Hey, Morgan, come sit and talk with us."

I slowly closed my curtain and turned around. Abigail wasn't there; I hadn't noticed that before. Her sewing supplies and my torn clothes were gone too. Laurie and Cherry were sitting on the lower bunk. Laurie was curled up by the pillows while Cherry was sitting with her legs crossed, back against the wall.

"Sure," I said awkwardly, sitting with them on the foot of the bed.

Laurie got right to the point, flattening the rumpled duvet in front of her. "So, you both like me."

I swallowed hard. I really had said that. I really do mean that.

Cherry glanced between us, looking like she wanted to say something.

"And I like you both," Laurie added.

"Oh," Cherry said, surprised. "Well that's fine."

Laurie blinked, also surprised. "Are you serious?"

Cherry stumbled over an apology, twisting her hair in her fingers nervously.

"No, it's not bad," she said, her whole face red. "I mean, not for me. I… I like you both a lot. It's okay." She looked at me expectantly, but Cherry was still staring at her.

I felt my chest get tight. "I don't… I don't know."

Mommy would be so mad.

Cherry pulled her gaze away from Laurie to ask if I was alright, saying I looked like I was going to pass out.

"I'm okay," I mumbled. "Just thinking." I had to get the words out, but it took a lot. "I… I… I'll think about it more."

Both of them looked crushed, but differently. I stared dejectedly at my hands. My hands?

"Okay," Laurie said, but it sounded like she was talking around some big lump in her throat. I was too, when I said goodnight.

I curled into my bed with my head in my hands. My legs were tucked right to my chest. I felt warm and sick all over. Why didn't I just say what I meant?

Maybe that's why nobody listens to me.

Chapter Twenty-Five (Ronnie)

It took until Thursday, but Cherry eventually worked up the courage to ask Morgan to come talk to us. Jason was taking us all out fishing in small groups, so when Barclay, Laurie, and Abigail were out, the four of us gathered in my cabin. Cherry and I sat on my bed, Ripley on the bottom bunk, and Morgan on the floor. There seemed to be a lot of tension between the girls, to the point that Cherry looked like she might cry. I sucked at my teeth, piecing together what I was going to say, and deciding I had to do this alone.

"Alright," I started before anyone else could talk. "I'll lead. Sorry for dragging you in here, Morgan, but we have something to tell you."

Cherry started to say something, but I cut her off by gently putting a hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay, I can do this myself," I said softly, much to her confusion.

I had to act like all of this was natural, which required a lot of talking faster than my friends.

Morgan gave us both a weird look, and so did Ripley, but they both kept quiet.

I took my hat off to run a hand through my hair, acting like I was psyching myself out. Was I? Maybe a little.

"I've already told Ripley and Cherry this, but even though we're not as close as they are to me, Cherry trusts you. She's my closest and oldest friend, so I trust you too," I said to Morgan, fiddling with the eyes of the duck hat in my lap. "I'm a vampire."

Her eyes widened, but she nodded slowly. "That makes sense."

I raised an eyebrow, nervously smiling. "Ouch."

She snorted a laugh. "I mean, between the weird reactions to the sun and your garlic allergy, I kind of figured."

I felt my cheeks getting hot and I laughed nervously. "Please don't tell anybody—"

"No no, I get it," she assured me immediately. "I really get it."

"You do?" Ripley asked cheekily, swinging his legs. He shot me a glance; he knew what was up.

Morgan, however, looked panicked, stuttering incomprehensibly. She looked at Cherry for help. Cherry slid off the bed to sit beside her, gingerly taking her hand, which stunned her completely.

"It's okay, Morgan. They're good people."

Morgan had this wild look about her, and her voice shook when she spoke. "You've kinda gone and told them by saying that…"

Cherry looked uncomfortable and sorry.

Morgan pulled her knees up to her chest and apologized before blurting, "I'm a werewolf, that's why I get it, that's why I knew you weren't human. I could smell the blood on you. I'm not dangerous, though, I'm just a normal girl…"

"Nobody thinks you're dangerous," Ripley said firmly. "Nobody thinks Ronnie's dangerous, and he killed a squirrel!"

I glared at him, feeling sick to my stomach, but Morgan sighed softly.

"That's nothing," she whispered. "I killed a rabbit once."

We were all quiet for a moment, but none of us seemed shocked or disgusted. We all understood, and without a word we made a pact to keep these things between us.

After a while, Morgan made a sacrifice. "I think we should tell everyone what we are."

We all turned to her.

"I don't mean, like, everyone," she clarified, looking down, her face turning red. "I just think it would be better to not have to keep track of who knows what between us. Because Laurie and Abigail know about me too. Why shouldn't Barclay? But that's me. It would be up to you, Ronnie, if you wanted to tell anybody else."

I thought for a long moment, but most of that time was spent ignoring the obvious answer.

"Sure. Why not? It's not like any of this will get back to our families or schools or anything."

"Of course not. This is serious. We'll protect each other."

So, when our group was back from our fishing trip, we went to dinner, and I thought for a long time about how I'd tell Barclay. I would want to be alone, so I asked Ripley if he'd be doing anything out of the cabin tonight.

He understood what I meant. "Yeah sure, I'll be looking around in the woods some more."

I worried for his safety, but he didn't seem fazed by the encounter we'd had, nor by how little Shebal had been around since Jason confronted him.

I took my time with dinner, which was chicken tacos. I didn't like chicken very much, blood or no blood, but I did get weak if I didn't eat. I was getting weak anyway… I would need to feed again soon.

I wondered if it would be all that bad if I killed something.

During the fishing trip, we were told that if we caught anything, we'd be able to eat it for lunch tomorrow. The previous group had caught a couple fish, so Morgan and Cherry were excited to contribute. Ripley spent the whole time trying to haul up garbage and what he called artifacts, which included a boot and a couple empty bottles. I thought it was sad that even here, in Silent Woods, there was pollution. Ripley said it was treasure, though. By the end of the trip, the girls had both caught a fish, and I'd managed to catch one as well, but I released it. I wasn't quite ready to be the reason something died again. Jason wasn't upset, nor were my friends, but I had no answer when they asked what made me throw it back in. If I was okay with the idea of them catching and killing fish, what made it different for me?

If I wasn't scared of Morgan after she had killed a rabbit, why was I scared of myself for killing that squirrel?

"Are you feeling okay?" Barclay's question brought me back to reality.

I looked at my half-eaten dinner, trying not to see the rot and the blood, and mumbled, "Yeah. A little tired is all."

He gave me a genuinely concerned look, asking if he could do anything for me.

I shook my head with a meek smile.

Morgan and Cherry walked over then, asking Ripley if he was going to hang out with them tonight.

His eyes brightened. "Oh sure! Thank you," he said, grinning.

"Bring your book," Cherry said. "We wanna hear some stories."

His face changed a bit as he understood, and he nodded. "I will. I know exactly the story to tell, too."

Morgan smiled awkwardly, fiddling with her nails. She

noticed I wasn't eating and asked if she could finish my dinner.

"Go ahead," I said, pushing the plate toward her.

She picked it up and leaned against the table, eating quickly as Cherry and Barclay chatted amiably about the fishing trip.

"How are you doing?" I asked Morgan, stretching out across the table.

She shrugged. "Alright. How are you?"

"Tired, but good." I sighed, then added quietly, "Anxious."

"Me too," she said, glancing back at her table.

"Am I coming by tonight?"

"Sure, I'll text you when I'm ready for you."

When Jason asked for help with the dishes, Abigail went up. Morgan hurried to drop off the plate as the rest of us went back to our cabins. Ripley picked up his book before saying bye to us and going to see the girls, leaving Barclay and I alone.

My heart was already racing.

He got a couple sodas from the cooler in the corner, passing one to me.

"Oh, thanks," I said, a little confused, as I took it.

"For your pills," he said awkwardly. "Ripley said you take… Pills? For your blood?"

My eyes widened and my mouth felt dry suddenly. "Right. Pills. For my blood. Yes."

He sat on his bed, pulling the curtain closed by pinching the edge between his toes and yanking.

"I'm just getting comfy, I'll be back in a sec," he said.

Something about all of that was so charming I forgot what I was doing. It took me a minute to find my pill bottle, but I took quite a few when I did. Was I really ready for this conversation?

He had just given me an out. I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm anemic or something. I could go with that. I could live with

that, probably a lot easier than I could live with this.

My phone buzzed; Morgan was telling me Abigail was back so they were starting.

It's too late to back out now. I've got to be ready.

I took off my jacket, hat, and glasses, wiggling back on my bed until my back was against the wall so I could stretch my legs out.

When Barclay opened his curtain again, he was wearing a big blue shirt and black shorts.

"Hey," I said, sucking at my teeth and trying not to look at him for too long. I could feel how much I was blushing.

"Hey." He stood and walked over, stretching his arms above his head. "Are you feeling alright? You seemed off all through dinner."

"Tired, like I said," I mumbled, then realized that sounded rude and tried to correct myself. "I get, uh, sleepy and weak easily if I don't take my pills very often."

"Were you skipping them?"

I glanced up at him. "I guess so…"

He frowned sympathetically. "That's no good, Ronnie… You should take care of yourself."

I rubbed the back of my neck, crossing my legs. "I try to."

"What are the pills for exactly, if I may ask?"

He was setting this up for himself. If I could just say the words…

I looked around the room frantically for any kind of guidance. "I, uh… They're…"

He smiled and gestured at the bed, asking to sit.

"Go ahead," I choked out, thankful to have anything else to say.

"You don't need to say," he said softly, smiling at me as he sat

a respectful distance away. "If you do, though, I wouldn't think any different of you."

"Oh I'm sure you will," I murmured without thinking.

He looked hurt. "Ronnie, I'm not going to judge you for being sick."

I looked up at him, raising an eyebrow and trying my best to keep my expression neutral, but vaguely upset.

He blushed deeply. "I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I mean… If you're physically sick and need to take pills for something like that, or if you have a mental illness that you take medicine for, I wouldn't judge you for that." Something in his eyes went dim, like a light went off in the back of his mind. "There's been a lot of medical assistance in my family life. I know what it's like."

"You can tell me about that," I said, jumping at the opportunity to not talk about myself. "If you want to, that is. No pressure."

He looked at his hands for a moment, getting very still and quiet. I recognized this version of Barclay, and that made me very sad.

"Hey…" I extended a hand to him. "You don't have to keep all those things in your head. I won't use this against you. It won't change how I see you. I understand if you don't want to tell me, but I'm here to help."

He looked up at me almost tearfully. "Thank you, Ronnie." He took a deep, shaky breath. "I'm okay for right now, though. I'd like to talk about you."

Oh, of course.

"Is that okay?"

I sucked at my teeth, anxiety eating at my stomach. There's no other way, is there? Defeated, I nodded, sighing through my nose.

He tilted his head a bit, not entirely convinced. "I don't want to force you into anything… Please do tell me to stop if you're uncomfortable."

His care and caution warmed my heart, but not as much as how well he could read me. "I will. You too, okay?"

He smiled with the corners of his mouth, his eyes glittering. "I will. So, tell me about the pills."

I tucked my legs under me so I could sit up and grab my bag. I pulled it onto my bed, sifting through it while putting words together. "They're blood pills. I take them for… My blood."

He nodded slowly.

I took the case out of my first aid kit, turning it over in my hands for a while. "Yeah, he wasn't joking. They're literally blood pills."

He laughed a bit, giving me a funny look.

"No, I'm serious."

His smile slowly faded. Seeming to be giving me the benefit of the doubt, he asked what that meant.

"They're made of… Honestly I'm not sure, probably blood and sugar and something else, but they're mostly blood, because I need to drink blood to survive."

Now he really laughed. It wasn't a funny laugh, though, it was scared and scary. I couldn't bear to look at his eyes, but I remembered this version of Barclay from when we nearly got hit by a car. His eyes had been bright with panic and brimmed with tears. I'm sure they were the same now.

"These are emergency pills, for when I get so hungry I start getting headaches and dizziness, and when it gets hard to think. I need to be able to think clearly to hunt, or else I might make a dumb mistake and get hurt. But I'd never hurt anybody else." I snuck a glance up at him and saw his face was pale and his

hands were still, clenched fists in his lap. I had to go on; if I stopped now, I'd never continue. "It's not really that bad when I bite an animal… My fangs are a little short, because I'm only half vampire, so it's a little tricky sometimes, but I get the job done. There's a chemical in my spit that makes the prey not feel anything. I don't take enough to do damage. At home, we don't even do it that much because we stockpile."

He was still silent. Why wasn't he saying anything?

"We don't bite humans," I said, doing my best to not stutter. "Only animals. Farm animals for the most part. I had to find a wild animal here, last week. That's where I was, when you and Ripley thought I went missing. You didn't notice me coming and going because I can turn into a mouse."

That made him absolutely holler with laughter. I froze, feeling cold, thick dread in my chest, panic sending icy spikes up and down my arms. Why was he laughing? This isn't funny. It's not a joke.

"Okay, you kind of had me at the start," he said, completely relaxed, when he'd recovered. He wiped a tear from his eye. "With the blood pills and the fangs and that. You do have weird teeth, I remember that, and your mom's a little eccentric, so I was willing to run with the whole vampire bit… But a mouse? Really? Everybody knows that Dracula can turn into bats, not mice. Even a rat would've been more convincing."

I watched him, stunned. I felt numb. "What do you mean?" I breathed.

"Is that why Ripley has been so tight with you lately? Is he teaching you how to tell folktales?" He asked, amused. "You're cute. I mean that's cute. You're almost there, Ronnie, just a bit weak on the delivery and the realism."

"The realism?" I spat. "This is my life. My real, actual life."

He paused, then laughed a bit. "Okay, I get it, you can stop the joke…"

"I'm not joking. Barclay, listen, I'm a vampire. My mother is a vampire."

"No you're not," he said plainly. "Vampires aren't real."

My brain short circuited for a second. This wasn't the objection I was expecting. I didn't have a way to fight this.

"But you… You and Ripley talk so much about this stuff. About Silent Woods," I argued. "You believe him, don't you? That's why you talk?"

"No, no, it's all a story," he said, some kind of concern edging his voice. "I don't joke about it because he takes it so seriously. I don't want to offend him."

"Why do you think he takes it seriously?"

I watched the click happen. His expression went from concerned to nearly angry. The change made me shrink back.

"You're being ridiculous," he said, his voice shaking a bit from the intensity of his emotions. "I know there's no such thing as vampires or Silent Woods or dangerous cats who don't belong here. It's all stories, made up, for kids."

"Barclay, I'm telling you, I'm a vampire and I'm sitting right here in front of you. I'm not lying."

"Of course you're lying, if vampires can exist then so can ghosts and ghosts aren't real or else I'd still have a mother!"

I froze again, shaking the slightest bit. He broke down in tears, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and hiding his face in his elbows. I moved closer, gently telling him I was going to touch him and he could say no if he needed. He didn't resist when I hugged him, so I held him delicately to my chest, like he was a baby deer.

"I'm sorry, Barclay," I whispered after a while, feeling his soft

hair being stirred by my breath. "I had no idea."

It took him a while to stop sobbing. I rocked him a little, patient.

"That's not your responsibility," he managed to say with some clarity. "You don't need to keep tabs on my problems."

"We haven't spoken in years, that's all. I don't need to do this, but I want to. I care about you. I never stopped."

This made him shake. He meekly told me that he still cared about me too.

"If you'd like, you can tell me what happened," I offered, shifting back a bit and letting go of him.

He looked up at me with his warm, lovely brown eyes and asked, "Is it okay if you still hold me while I do?"

I got butterflies in my stomach as I put my arms back around him. He relaxed into me, keeping his hands in his lap. He spent a long while explaining how, after he moved away, his mother was diagnosed with cancer. Her health spiraled quickly and she lost the fight earlier than anyone had expected. She never got to see him on hormones, she never got to see him growing up and going through high school. She never got to see me again.

"That's why I've gotten closer with my religion," he concluded softly. "It was very important to her, being Jewish, so I've really embraced it to be closer to her. I can't get her back, no matter what I do or what I believe in… I can only remember her and hope she's… Somewhere." He stiffened and his voice hardened. "She's not here, though. Not anymore. You can't tell me magic and fairy tales are real if the dead can't rise."

I let go of him, feeling unwelcome.

"It's one thing to make jokes and tell stories, but you can't play mind games with people," he said in a very final way, getting up and straightening his shirt and pants. He didn't say another

word to me, putting on bug spray in the bathroom and walking out.

As the door shut, I was left alone with the bathroom fan whirring, ventilating the pungent smell of the bug spray.

My phone buzzed. Morgan had asked me if it was okay to come over, telling me it had gone great.

I tossed my phone on the nightstand, sinking down into my bed with my head in my hands.

Chapter Twenty-Six (Morgan)

I woke up the next morning to a text from Ronnie saying that the talk with Barclay didn't go well. He didn't believe in any of this stuff for real, he said. He begged me not to tell Ripley, and that he'd work it out as soon as possible so it wouldn't break Ripley's heart. I felt bad for sleeping through the text tone, so I gave him a belated promise to not say anything about it, then went to breakfast.

Ronnie was a wreck. He didn't touch his food and he kept zoning out. I offered to sit with him, eating his pancakes and listening to Ripley and Barclay talk mildly about what we'd be doing today.

"I hope there's no more weird stuff tonight," Ripley said, "at the bonfire."

"Mhm." Barclay pushed his food around on his plate, leaning his cheek against his hand.

I decided saying nothing would be best, so I busied myself with drinking orange juice.

Ripley looked crestfallen. He brought up all our dishes when we were finished eating.

We had a bit of time in the morning before Jason would take us out in small groups to pick mushrooms, berries, and other edible plants. We were all excited for that, but we didn't

overlook Shebal's absence.

He'd been around less and less since Jason confronted him. It was kind of scaring me. I tried to not think about what I saw on the beach that night, but the memory was fresh in my mind. It hadn't even been a week.

Back in the cabin, we all hung out. Abigail had a kind of mischievous look as she was sorting through her yarn. Cherry was laying on her bed, balancing a pillow on her feet. Laurie dangled her legs over the ladder, watching me as I made my bed.

"Why don't we put on some music?" Cherry said, right before the pillow fell onto her face.

"I have something for Morgan first," Abigail said, standing up. She had a bundle in her arms, wrapped in a blanket.

I smoothed down my top blanket and sat, feeling a little self conscious with everyone looking at me.

"I'm sorry it took me quite a bit, but I repaired your clothes," she said. "Mostly, anyway. I kind of took artistic liberty with it, but I think you'll like it."

I took the bundle from her, nerves making my hands shake a bit as I unwrapped it. I didn't have a single idea what she could be referring to. I was scared it was some kind of prank.

Under the folds of the knitted blanket, I found a beautiful ankle-length skirt made of stripes of soft pink and yellow fabric, including the salvageable patches of purple from my shirt and the pockets from my jean shorts. They had been made deeper, too. The waistband was made of a thick, soft rope of red yarn.

My whole face was hot from blushing and I couldn't stop myself from smiling. I was so taken aback. It was hard to process what was going on. I mumbled a thank you and hugged her tightly. She seemed a little embarrassed, which I'd never

seen in her before, telling me it was no big deal and showing me how to tighten or loosen the yarn belt.

"If you really wanna thank somebody, though, thank Cherry," Abigail added, taking her blanket back and folding it up. "She gave me the idea when I was having trouble putting your clothes back together."

When I looked at her, Cherry smiled and tucked her hands between her knees, saying, "Oh, it's nothing, I just noticed you don't have any skirts and you would look great in one…"

My head spun a bit as I sat down again. This wasn't a joke. These people really accepted me, every part of me.

"Do you wanna try it on?" Laurie asked, swinging her legs and smiling giddily. She was blushing.

"Sure," I stammered, clutching it to my chest. I shut the curtain nervously and had to steady my hands before trying to take my pants off. When I put on the skirt, it felt amazing. The fabric was soft on my skin and the yarn belt kept it fitting perfectly, resting on my hip bones. It was the right length and size, too. Looking down at myself, I didn't feel silly or like I was playing pretend. I felt real. I felt beautiful. I felt free.

When I opened the curtain, they all told me how wonderful I looked. I felt like I was going to cry.

When it came time for us to go out foraging, I changed back into my pants. I didn't want to dirty my lovely new skirt. The first group was Abigail, Ripley, Barclay, and myself, following Jason. He was pleasantly surprised to know that Abigail knew quite a lot about what plants to eat and which to avoid, so he let her help him lead the expedition. Ripley was very interested in it all, but he kept asking if there were any plants here that couldn't be found anywhere else. Barclay seemed vaguely upset whenever Ripley talked about that kind of thing. He hung back,

not really participating.

I went up to him while we were walking deeper into the woods, past the big rock.

"Hey," I said, trying to be friendly. "What's up? You don't seem to be having much fun."

He looked at me for a few seconds, then sighed. "I'm alright."

I wasn't sure if I should push or not, but I figured there was no harm in it. I wanted him to feel cared for, too. I asked if he was sad about something specific.

"It's… Nothing important," he said stiffly, kicking a rock along the path.

"If you're not feeling like being in the group, I can show you some stuff myself," I offered. "I don't know as much as Abigail, or Ripley with all the notes he's taking, but I have a good sense of smell and I'm sure that can come in handy for seeing if something is poisonous."

He accepted, though it seemed to be a chore for him. We clung to the edges of the meadow we were in, looking for berry bushes. After a good half hour, he and I had been talking pleasantly about a show he and I both watched. I recommended him a few movies I thought he'd like, and he said he'd look into them at home. He was kind of warming up to me. As I debated letting him know he could talk to me about what was bothering him, a creaking sound in the trees made me freeze.

"Are you okay?" Barclay asked.

I flinched a bit at his voice. I was straining so hard to hear the faint whispers in the woods that it made his regular voice sound like a shout to me.

"Yeah," I said, shaking my head to clear my thoughts. "I just thought I heard something."

He looked at me warily. "What do you mean?"

"I thought I heard a voice coming from the trees," I answered.

His expression became very closed off. "Oh," he said simply, getting up and walking off to the group.

Startled, I watched him go. Forgetting the voice, I followed him with my proverbial tail between my legs.

That night, we had an interesting snack platter made of the berries, mushrooms, and other plants we had found. There were some wild asparagus shoots that had been fried in butter. Some sweet-scented bedstraw, black currants, gooseberries, raspberries, strawberries, and blackberries were added to a dandelion leaf salad. Peppergrass seeds were used to season cooked apricot jelly mushrooms. I'd found some hedgehog mushrooms, so Jason cooked those too. Shebal was finally around to help out, frying the rest of the fish that we had caught, which had been stored in the freezer.

It was a lovely dinner. Everything tasted good, and there was a sense of togetherness because we'd all contributed. It was a little exciting too, like we were adventurers, or like we lived in the wild.

Jason told us about how he forages like this in every season. He talked about his cabin only a few miles away on the mainland, and how sometimes he holds potlucks for the locals.

"Oh, that's you?" Shebal commented, giving him a friendly look.

Jason glanced at him, a mix of bewilderment and fear crossing his face.

Shebal's face flushed. "I… I have heard stories about someone who does that kind of thing around here."

Jason nodded slowly, then went back to his food.

When we were finished eating, Shebal brought out the skewers, marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars.

We had some wild raspberries left over, so we added them to our roasted s'mores, too.

Between the whistling wind, the gentle sounds of the lake, the songs of water bugs, and the crackling of the fire, I thought I heard something in the woods again. Remembering the way Barclay had left me in the field, I hung my head and watched a piece of wood being devoured by the fire. Layer by layer, it curled away, bleaching and blackening before turning to cinders. When the wind blew, the flames stirred and picked up. They ate at more and more of the kindling.

Seeing this, it struck me that I hadn't been blindly mad in a long time. For the entire two weeks of camp, the very eventful two weeks, I hadn't had to break or throw anything to get past my anger. Only the frustration in the kitchen. Smiling to myself, I put my hand on my hip. My phone wasn't in my pocket. Remembering it was laying on my pillow, charging, I decided I would go get it to ask Suzanne if she'd like to call me tomorrow so we could talk. I missed her.

"Is it okay if I go in for a minute?" I asked Laurie, who was sitting beside me.

She looked up from the fire. She'd been mesmerized by it too. It took her a second to process what I'd asked her, but when she did, she laughed sweetly.

"You don't need my permission to do things like that," she said. "Are you going to go change into your new skirt?"

I blushed a bit. "I hadn't planned to, but that's a nice idea…"

"You do look really good in it, you know," she said, blushing. Or was it the heat of the fire making her skin glow?

"Thank you," I mumbled, getting up. "Would you like anything from inside?"

"No thank you," she said pleasantly, then added in a hushed

tone, "I think Abigail is keeping the bugs off us."

I laughed a bit. Maybe she was; I hadn't felt any bites all night.

Inside, the room felt real. More real than it had all summer, and more real than my room back at home.

Home?

Wasn't this home?

I took my time undressing, in my orange curtain cave, laying my clothes on my bed in neat order. Taking in the musty, woody smell of the cabin with the flowery smell of Cherry's perfume and the richness of the woods outside, I tried to stay in the moment. It was too easy to be in my head all the time, thinking about something else, somewhere else, where I didn't have to worry about being me. Here, though, being myself wasn't stressful.

I stretched my arms over my head, breathing deeply. I cracked all the aches in my back from being hunched over all the time. Maybe it was time to start standing straight.

As I reached for my skirt, which was still placed delicately on my bed, I heard a sound that made my body tense up. All my hairs stood on end as I slowly opened the curtain. Silent on my bare feet, I walked to the window at the back of the cabin opposite the door. My hands were so still as I nudged the curtain aside just enough to peek through.

There, in the green twilight, a pair of glowing feline eyes.

I couldn't tell why, but something about it just wasn't right. I felt ill. I backed up a few paces, standing in the middle of the room, naked and defenseless with this feeling of all-encompassing dread taking over my mind. Something was out there that wasn't just a cat, and it was surely going to hurt my friends. They were the only people in the whole world who cared about me aside from my little brother and my therapist.

My mouth went dry. My teeth ached and my muscles strained. I shut my eyes as tight as I could, not wanting to see any part of this change.

My claws skittered across the hardwood floor. I burst through the door, moving like a whirlwind around the side of the cabin. I heard people shouting behind me, but I ignored them. All I could see was this giant, steely gray tabby American forest cat standing in front of me.

Even though I was bigger than this cat, I felt small and weak under his startlingly green gaze. He hissed and fluffed up his already fluffy fur, arching his back into a terrible shape. I growled, a low sound that shook my body, pinning my ears back and lifting my tail to try to show the thing that I wouldn't back down.

Behind the American forest cat, there was an even larger shadow creeping closer.

"You didn't tell me they have dogs!" the cat snapped at the new figure.

"This isn't a dog," the new cat said. She was a large Siberian lynx with narrow shoulders and massive paws. "She's a girl."

I was so taken aback by the fact I could understand them that it barely registered with me that this lynx knew me.

"What do you mean, I'm a girl?" I asked, then found myself even more surprised. How was I talking with this body? This has never happened before, but I've also never tried.

The lynx seemed to smile, her eyes glittering in the low light. "I remember your smell. Don't you remember me?"

Her calmness made me drop my guard just a bit, so I relaxed my posture as I tried to place her scent. She was familiar, but I couldn't quite remember where. I hadn't seen a lynx before in my whole life. But there was no way she could know I'm

a human if she'd only seen me as a wolf, so I thought more abstractly. It hit me suddenly: this lynx was the pudgy albino girl from the little store up the road!

Something puppyish in my heart took over my instincts. I trembled with excitement. "I do remember you! You and your friend wanted to know about us, the campers, right? Are you a werecat? I'm a werewolf. I've never met anybody else like me before," I babbled, my tail starting to wag.

The American forest cat seemed to be angered by this, but the lynx stepped ahead of him. She was elegant, even on those big paws.

"I'm not a werecat," she said, "but I am very much like you. I can be your friend and show you our world. All you have to do is answer some simple questions for me."

The American forest cat growled and swished his tail, glaring at me. "What are you doing, Jolly? This isn't a game."

Jolly looked over her shoulder and hissed at him. "Do you think the goal is to hurt innocent children?"

This infuriated him, but he said nothing.

She looked back at me coolly and asked my name.

"Morgan!" Cherry shouted from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to see her holding a skewer like a spear, glancing between me and the cats. I backed up to be closer to her, fluffing up my hackles again. I wasn't sure if I wanted to fight or not, but I was certainly scared.

"They don't want to hurt us," I told her, my voice trembling as much as my legs.

Jolly gave me a genuinely apologetic look and said, "She can't understand you."

"Why not?" I gasped, looking between the two of them. Panic was starting to grip me.

"It's okay Morgan, I've got this," Cherry said with a wicked smile.

Fear shot through me. What was she gonna do with that skewer?

Suddenly, the American forest cat leaped over Jolly and shot right at Cherry, all claws, teeth, and fur. I growled louder than I ever have and put myself in his path, lowering my head to protect my neck. He crashed into me and I bowled forward, knocking him out of the air. He sprawled on the ground, scrambling to regain his footing. I lunged at the cat, standing over him as he flattened his body to the ground, hissing and spitting. Baring my fangs, I breathed hot air in his face, snapping my jaws when he tried to swipe at my nose.

"Don't hurt my friends," I growled in his face, but the message was for everyone here. I didn't want Cherry getting involved in this, both for her sake and for Jolly's.

When Cherry whispered my name, I backed off, keeping my eyes on the cat for a long few seconds. Cherry's hand very gently met my shoulder and I leaned into her touch.

"We've gotta go back," she said.

Reluctant, I whined.

"Please. There's more."

For the first time, I let the sounds meet my ears. There were more voices of the cats, a warbled mix of feline sounds and human voices. I could hear crying, too, and Jason's angry voice. As much as it scared me to turn my back on these two, something in Jolly's eyes made me extend my trust in her a little bit more.

I lowered my tail and turned to follow Cherry back to the fire pit, my heart beating louder than any sound in the whole world.

Chapter Twenty-Seven (Ronnie)

It started with the wolf exploding through the door that Morgan had entered only moments before. I knew that she was a wolf, but I guess it took a while to register that the wolf was her. Then it was the shadow jumping off the roof of her cabin. A pitch black cat had been hiding up there and it came leaping down at us. Cherry immediately grabbed a skewer, holding it like a weapon, and took off after Morgan. The rest of us were too scared to act. Abigail pulled Ripley close and started talking to the cat, trying to tell it to leave us alone, but it wasn't going anywhere.

And then there were more. They peeled out of the undergrowth around our cabins, stalking up to us on silent paws. Five of them joined the small black cat: a Siamese, a Russian blue, a serval, a young lion, and a clouded leopard.

White fuzz collected around the edges of my vision, like a snowy television screen. I heard Jason yelling at Shebal, saying this has gone too far and he's about to get one of us killed. I heard Laurie crying behind me. I heard the roar of the flames. I heard Barclay saying my name. I could have heard the whole world if I tried, I was sure, but I'd be damned if I could react to any of it. Some horror had rooted me to the log I was sitting on, be it the dampness of the wood soaking into my pants, the

heat of the fire on my back, or the sickeningly familiar feeling of being prey.

Was this how that squirrel felt?

No, this is how I felt in the cement lot behind the school. This is how I felt when the lynx was creeping towards me through the ferns. This is how I feel, helpless all over again.

And I'm starving too, I would be so strong, I would be vicious and I would save my friends. If I could just move!

"Please Ronnie, I'm scared," Barclay whispered. He was very close to me. "I'm scared. I just want you to hold me. I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you."

Those words, and seeing Cherry and Morgan coming bravely around the side of the cabin, broke me out of my trance. I put my arms around Barclay and pulled him close, finding solace in the release of energy. It calmed the ache in my teeth and the fuzz in my brain.

"It's gonna be okay," I whispered to him as he hugged me tightly.

The leopard raised her head to look at Shebal, who was standing, trembling, between the ensemble of cats and Jason. At her side were the three house cats, sitting and studying us. The serval quietly raised a paw to Abigail, who immediately stopped talking, looking incredibly shy.

"What? What happened?" Ripley asked frantically, grabbing her arm. "Did the serval speak to you?"

The serval looked at him curiously, but simply walked back to where the young lion was sitting, nearer to where they came from.

Cherry stood shaking in the mouth of the strip between the cabins, clutching a handful of Morgan's ruff. The big brown wolf watched with a worried look, whining softly.

The intense silence that fell on the island was truly remarkable. I don't think nights have ever been quiet for me. In the city we have cars and neighbors passing by, out here there's coyotes and the wind rustling the trees to sound like crashing waves. But even the air seemed still now. The night wildlife had gone away and the lake itself was holding its breath.

The leopard ignored us completely, staring up at Shebal and speaking in a regal voice, "You have responsibilities with us too, you know."

"Responsibilities I didn't ask for," he shot back.

"Do any of us ask for what we're given?"

"You've got to have the will to get past it," he said, crossing his arms firmly. "You have to make your own life."

The leopard growled softly, swishing her long, plump tail. "I don't want to be doing this any more than you, Shebal, but you're my little brother and you're being a kitten about it, so I have to bring you home. Father misses you. And our home."

"It was your choice to move," he sighed. "I don't like having to tiptoe around the place."

"Not much different than what he did before he went and pulled this silly trick," one of the cats mumbled, and the trio laughed.

"I heard that, Miraf," Shebal growled at the Siamese.

"So did the rest of them," Miraf purred, gesturing to us with her long, seal-point tail.

Shebal looked absolutely shocked. He turned to us, his mouth hanging open a bit. Abigail and Ripley nodded, and for once he was solemn about it. I nodded too.

"What? What's going on?" Barclay whispered to me, digging his fingernails into my arm.

"Can't you hear them talking?" I asked quietly.

He looked at me as though I'd just told him I was a vampire.

"It's not a joke," I whispered with a bit of an edge in my voice.

He tried to form a sentence for a moment, but eventually let go of me and stood. His arms hung stiffly at his sides. All eyes were on him.

"Apparently you lot are talking cats," he said angrily, pointing at the group of felines, "but I can't hear a thing but you rambling," he turned his pointing finger to Shebal. "So somebody had better explain what could possibly be going on right now. And I had better be able to hear it."

Ripley, immediately, was overflowing with information. "The cats are speaking in Common, that's the language of all things here and everywhere on Earth, and we all know it but you can't understand it unless you believe, or if you're something not human."

Barclay looked at him for a couple beats, then smiled. "Thank you, Ripley. That's actually really helpful." Then he turned on the cat crowd, speaking harshly again. "Now let's have one of you be helpful, like my friend."

As the cats conferred silently, I scooted back to where Laurie was still crying.

"Don't be scared," I said gently, holding out a hand to her. "You're safe."

"I'm not scared for me," she whispered, wrapping her hand around two of my fingers and nodding at the space between our cabins. "I'm scared for them."

Morgan and Cherry were still standing there, displaced. They seemed frozen by everything. Morgan's imposingly large body was between Cherry and the rest of us, protecting her silently. When she noticed us watching, she flicked her ears and gave us a steady look as though to say she's got this under control.

"They're fine," I told Laurie with a half smile.

She looked like she wanted to trust me, but said nothing.

Up ahead, the clouded leopard was speaking to Barclay. "Can you hear us?"

Barclay's harsh, focused facade wavered for a moment, but he gave her a firm nod.

"Good. My apologies for the frightening introduction," she said, studying him with her round, glowing eyes. "My name is Temmey. I'm Shebal's sister and a princess of the Catfolk. I've come to collect my brother."

Barclay seemed to be short circuiting. He said nothing for a long time. I was starting to get scared that he'd break down right there, so I went through different scenarios in my head, trying to figure out what I would do. Just as I was about to leave Laurie to comfort him, Ripley clambered to his feet.

"I've got this," Barclay said to him defensively, but he was shaking.

"It's okay, I'm here to help," he replied with a proud smile. "So, what Temmey has said is that she's a Catfolk princess. Catfolk are, and correct me if I'm wrong, Miss Temmey, a race of shapeshifters. They have two forms, feline and human, and they move between them in a magical way as opposed to a natural way, like Morgan and her wolf form."

Barclay, again, went blank and looked like he might faint. "Morgan is a wolf," he said dryly.

Ripley looked confused. "Yeah, a werewolf. Didn't Ronnie tell you the other night when he told you he's a vampire?"

I winced.

Barclay's mouth became a thin, stern line. "Oh. No, he did not. But that's fine. Thank you for telling me now."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Morgan and Cherry moving

closer. Cherry had lowered her skewer.

Ripley just smiled awkwardly and fumbled for words, looking between Barclay and the cats.

Temmey butted in to save him. "That was a surprisingly accurate and very educated thing to say," she said politely, but like she wasn't sure why he said it. "Our island has sunk, and it's your supervisor's fault. He vanished in the middle of the night and when word got around to our ears that he had last been seen with a lakefellow, we assumed he had been kidnapped."

"A lakefellow?" Barclay interrupted, looking at Ripley for the answer.

"Oh, I don't know that one," he said shyly. "Miss Temmey, could you tell us?"

She gave Shebal the most disappointed look I'd ever seen a cat pull off. "Why don't you explain that one, brother?"

His face twisted into an ashamed grimace and he shoved his hands into his armpits. A gust of wind blew across the island, rustling all the trees and causing the plumes of fire to curl and reach into the air. Laurie leaned into me, shivering, so I gave her my jacket.

"Fine," Shebal sighed, sounding like a child who had been caught doing something he shouldn't be. "Lakefellows live in this lake. They're people… They're sort of like mermaids I suppose. They have long tails and… And… Oh, why don't I just show you?" He stormed off to the beach, moving through the group of cats with purpose and authority.

Jason looked at the cats and then at us, urgency and fear in his eyes. "What's he doing?"

Temmey looked up at him gravely. "I don't know. But that's why I brought so many of us."

I squeezed Laurie's hand. "Do you want to go inside?"

Shakily, she responded, "No. I want to be here, just in case."

I nodded and wondered to myself if I could help protect them if I had to.

Shebal, standing at the foot of the bridge now, began to shimmer a soft yellow color.

Morgan snarled and lurched forward, shaking and posed like she was ready to attack. Cherry hurried to her side, trying to calm her down.

Shebal was too far away to hear, but I'm not sure if he could've heard her anyway. His body vanished entirely for a split second before a magnificent white tiger stood in his place. I held my breath, pulling Laurie closer as the lake in front of him began to surge. The fire danced frantically in front of us, mimicking the movements of the lake's surface. The water darkened and bulged outward, spilling onto the bridge and the sand.

Laurie let go of me, jumping to her feet and grabbing a spare piece of firewood beside one of the sitting logs.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice a strained whisper.

"Helping," she said, dipping the end of the stick in the fire. It caught and she pulled it out, waving it like a beacon in front of her. "Abigail, watch your hat."

Abigail turned around and took off her wide-brimmed straw hat, the fire's glimmer reflecting the wonder in her eyes.

Laurie marched over to Cherry and Morgan, holding her fire stick like a club. She didn't seem afraid of it. She was so in control that she was able to bring the two girls around to where Jason was standing. Feeling a little useless, I walked over to Barclay and Ripley, standing between them and pretending I had myself together.

"Ronnie, what is all this?" Barclay whispered plaintively.

I didn't have an answer for him, so I just held his hand.

As the water began to finally properly part, the serval and the little lion trotted behind us to sit beside Abigail.

Three shapes rose from the lake. We all moved closer, but I had to keep Ripley by my side. The cats were in front of us still like a barrier between us and these creatures. They were all shiny and slimy looking, with bodies that looked very human aside from their long tails and barrel chests. They had odd faces too, with what looked like muzzles. The shortest one was very plump and had skin so black I could hardly see him aside from the bright green freckles on his shoulders. The next tallest had shiny gray-yellow skin and a tail like a shark's, but more flexible and held sort of catlike, held at an angle away from the body instead of down between the legs. The one in the middle was as tall as Morgan, with very dark blue skin and a thick eel's tail like the first. They were each holding a twisted piece of driftwood like a sword, and they walked along the surface of the water to stand on the sand beside Shebal.

"Here they are," Shebal said snippily, lashing his long tail. "My kidnappers."

"Don't mock me, brother. Tell the truth."

"You owe us that much," Jason growled.

Shebal looked embarrassed for a moment, pawing the ground as he sheepishly told us his story. "I left our home to see my boyfriend. Every time I tried to see him on our land, the scouts would send the alarm that we were under attack. I was scared he would be killed. So when I heard that Jason, this good man here, was looking for another capable adult to supervise children for a month, I knew I had the experience from being with our little sister. I also knew that I would never be allowed to go if I asked our fathers."

"So you ran away and let us think you'd been killed?" she

growled, swishing her tail back and forth.

"And you never bothered to mention this to me?" Jason added, stepping forward. "We have kids here that we're responsible for."

Shebal shrank back. The lakefellows got closer to him. Laurie and the girls were still ready to fight. The smaller cats were advancing a bit, but Temmey held her ground. Nobody seemed to know what was expected of them.

Suddenly, twin flashes of gray came zooming past us and through the crowd of cats. It was a large and fluffy tabby being followed by an even bigger cat, a familiar Siberian lynx. They breached the front line of the cats, coming to a scrambling stop on the wet sand as the three lakefellows stepped forward and pointed their long, gnarled swords at them. Shebal swatted at the pair, letting out a deep roar that echoed across the water.

Wordlessly, the lynx cussed out the smaller cat, leaping on his back and pinning him. She looked apologetically at the Prince of the Catfolk, dragging the fluffy cat back to the side of the closest cabin.

The entire time, the other cats had been watching in stillness. When the two intruders were settled, Temmey coldly addressed her brother, asking why he would hurt his own kind.

Shebal's tail curled and he lifted his head, looking arrogantly down at his sister as he rose up to his full height. "If he would harm these people, my friends and my love, then he would harm me as well."

"They're not our kind," she sniffed.

"They aren't either." He looked out at us, meeting each of our eyes with a thoughtful and protective gaze. "If you're trying to accuse me of abandoning my family and my kind for these three, then the same can be said of my relationships with all of

these children, and Jason. Am I really betraying you by helping them?" With a glance at Jason, he added softly, "Even if I was doing a terrible job."

Temmey didn't answer. Miraf and the black cat quietly peeled off to sit with the lynx. The Russian blue groomed her face, and there was an air of awkwardness about the group.

Quietly, the flame on Laurie's branch flickered out.

Eventually, Temmey hung her head and let out a long breath. "Okay, brother. I know what you want. I'll propose to our fathers that we and the Lakefellows come together and live as allies."

Without hesitation, the three lakefellows threw down their swords and whooped in glee. The gray one and the short one leaped into the water, while the tallest one grabbed Shebal by his thick neck and rolled into the water with him. They splashed and played, overjoyed by the news.

Jason covered his mouth with his hand, his other arm clutching his stomach. Stormily, he walked back in the direction of the adults' cabin, but Shebal called him back with a roar, drifting smoothly up the shore and shaking himself dry.

"Come back," he said, his voice echoing off the trees. "I'm sorry, Jason. I do owe you answers. I owe you all answers. I want to show you my home… My family's home."

Jason stopped and turned. He said nothing, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

Shebal took the answer he wanted, nodding at the lakefellows. They took off into the water, swimming toward the far end of the lake, past the side of the island we weren't allowed to enter. Shebal walked past his sister, brushing her amiably before welcoming us on his journey. Then, like a silver stream in the light of the moon, into the trees he vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Eight (Morgan)

The procession of cats slipped into the trees between our two cabins. Only the lynx and the black cat waited for us, keeping to either side of our nervous, ragtag group as we picked our way through the forest. I didn't want to, but I had the best eyes in the dark, so I made my way to the front. Laurie and Cherry stuck to my sides. It really was getting dark, and I could smell their fear. It drowned out mine, even when I overhead Jason telling Abigail and the boys to hurry up.

We got to the orange line to find it had been cut. It was laying partially on the ground, dangling from two large trees. It felt wrong to walk over it, but we all did so in silence.

A long, heavily quiet walk through the wilder side of the island took us several minutes. I may have been counting a bit slow, but my estimate came to about half an hour, which was double the time it took me to walk at this pace from the cliff face to the orange rope. I remembered from the time I was bored after dinner, so I measured the distance in my head when I took the walk with Laurie.

I looked up at her, worried. She had left her fire stick back at the pit when Cherry had discarded her skewer. Even without her weapon, she looked a lot more brave than I'd ever seen her. Even in this fearsome body, I felt like a scared child at her side.

Gradually, the path we walked became more defined, and the smell of cats was so overpowering that I had to hold my breath at times. I saw glimpses of paths snaking around in the undergrowth, dotted with glowing eyes. I wanted to say something, I wanted to tell Cherry and Laurie what I was seeing, but Jolly's words hung in my chest like a stone.

"Oh wow," I heard Barclay whisper behind me. "Those are all cats…"

Abruptly, the trees fell away on either side of us and we stood looking out over a long meadow, full of tall, swaying grass. In the darkness, it looked a bit like the lake's surface, but I could see the definitions of each blade. Laurie and Cherry stopped in their tracks.

"Come on," Ronnie urged the group. "The cats want us to follow them the whole way."

"We can't see," Cherry said, a little distressed.

Ronnie delicately stepped between us, looking out with concern over the field. "I can? It's just grass."

"He's a vampire," Ripley said, nervous but eager to get a move on. "He can see in the dark, but we can't."

Jason sighed huffily. "What did you just say, Ripley?"

I looked over my shoulder, pricking my ears and staring at the large, burly man. I couldn't see past my fear. Could I take him down? Maybe, if I really tried.

Ripley squeaked and tucked his hands to his chest, mumbling what he'd said.

Before Jason could say anything more, Barclay interjected harshly, telling them both there was no time for this. He pushed past Ronnie and Cherry, stalking out into the sea of grass.

"Wait," Ronnie called after him, jogging along. "You can't see without me."

The group filed into a long line after the two. I stayed behind the girls, Abigail included, while Ripley and Jason hung behind me. Jason kept having to nudge Ripley along, as he was getting distracted by the glimmers of movement around us. I had to keep my ears pinned back. I didn't want to hear nor see what was going on in the grass. It would only scare me.

When the line suddenly stopped moving, I felt a soft paw touch mine. I looked down to see Jolly smiling back up at me.

"Go on ahead," she whispered.

I brushed Abigail's calf, but she was already telling Laurie and Cherry to move to the side. Our line slowly moved to stretch horizontally across the edge of a small knoll, overlooking a quaint copse of trees in the middle of a shallow, flowery meadow. Even with their petals turned in for the night, they were fragrant.

I peered into the clearing to see the cats creeping in from the sides of the knoll: the American forest cat and the lynx were somehow there already, with the black cat between them. The Russian blue lumbered in from the other side, the Siamese trailing behind her. Temmey and the serval sat together near the trees, the adolescent lion curled as small as possible right beside them. Shebal was sitting far to the side, where I could see the glimmer of the moonlight on the water. New cats crept around the edges of the clearing, appearing from the grass or from the cluster of trees.

From a deeply shaded hollow in the roots of two massive oaks, an orangish puma emerged, his head low and tail dragging.

"Are my daughters back?" he mewled. "I smell my daughters. Where are you, my sweet girls?"

Temmey and the young lion quickly went to meet him, nuzzling him as he spoke softly. He looked so weak and barely

made it five feet from the hollow before he was laying down again. I listened carefully to the leopard telling him that Shebal was back. Hearing the news, he looked so broken.

Across the clearing, Shebal rose and slunk over to his father. He looked smaller and somehow more ashamed than he had back at camp. The puma cuffed his ears halfheartedly and licked his face, asking him where he'd been and what kept him away. There was a lot of pain in his voice, and his movements lacked energy. He swayed on his paws, exhausted.

"Love," Shebal murmured meekly, "and responsibility."

"Don't joke with me, son."

"I'm not joking." He sighed heavily. "Hurrem, my father, I'm sorry. I got a job with a local camp, right here on this island. I've been working for the past two weeks and I still have the rest of the month."

"You've been here this whole time?" Hurrem cried softly and remorsefully, but he didn't interrupt further.

Shebal apologized again.

"Don't say that so many times, son. Show me your friends. Show me who kept you."

He turned his mighty head to the ridge. With a flick of his tail and a look over his shoulder, he beckoned us down. Ripley wasted no time in jumping down to the clearing below, but kept a respectful distance. He looked humbled. Abigail took more care in getting down, helping Laurie and Cherry. Ronnie and Barclay helped each other down. When I was left up there with Jason, we shared an awkward moment.

"I had no idea," he said quickly and quietly, "and I promise I won't tell anyone."

This caught me off guard a bit, but I tried to convey my gratitude by lowering my head and tucking my tail a little. He

told me he'd understand me if I spoke, and that we're more alike than I might think. Then he stepped down. I followed him with a jump, silent. Anxiety pulled at my belly. I tried to ignore it.

Temmey turned to us, putting a gentle and protective paw over her sister's shoulders. "Our father cannot open his eyes, but he can tell you're here. Please be patient with us."

Jason nodded respectively, folding his hands at his waist. "Of course." He awkwardly looked at the dejected puma, squeezing his hand around his wrist. "King Hurrem? My name is Jason, I've been working with Shebal for the past two weeks…"

"You keep him safe," he said flatly, sinking down to the ground again. "Thank you."

"I do what I can," he said softly before stepping back.

The whole world seemed to be hushed as the puma scanned us, his eyes closed but his mouth slightly open. He would occasionally whisper things to himself. The only word I caught was werewolf. I tucked my tail between my legs, lowering myself instinctively.

"Morgan," Shebal asked, his voice clear and calm over the muggy air, "you don't need to be scared. You're safe. You're all safe."

I pressed my chin into the earth, looking up at him at an angle that hurt my eyes.

Hurrem twitched his tail idly. "Morgan? The werewolf?"

Shebal leaned against his father's side lightly. "Yes. She's cowering."

The puma seemed amused, but only for a moment. "Come up here, dear girl. You don't need to be afraid. I'm hardly the King of the Catfolk these days…"

While I wanted deep in my bones to creep on my belly to meet him, I made myself walk like a normal person. He was

bigger up close, but he still looked ragged and tired. He sniffed me with his large, ruddy nose and brushed his whiskers on my face. I let him, closing my eyes in a way I had heard was calming for cats.

"Hello," he said in a very gentle, subdued voice. "Nice to meet you, Morgan."

I whimpered softly, forcing out a very small, "You too."

My safety beside him seemed to have given everyone else permission to get closer. It started with Ripley and Abigail, then Laurie, Cherry and Ronnie. Not long after, Barclay followed, hovering with Jason at the back of the crowd. He looked like he was going to be sick.

"Has everyone joined us?" Hurrem said in a pleasant voice. "That's good. I would love to meet you all."

"Hi, I'm Ripley. Are you okay?" the boy blurted nervously.

The puma froze for a second, then let a long sigh deflate his body. He rested his head on his large paws, then said, "I'm sorry, dear children. The King of the Catfolk shouldn't be this weak for his guests, but it's been so hard to eat or walk or think these days. All I can do is sleep. Sleep and dream…"

"What happened?"

Shebal stiffened, flattening his ears.

"The creatures from the lake took our home," Hurrem said darkly, "and with it, my husband."

Shebal flinched, getting up and stepping back a few paces. Temmey hung her head as he spoke in a panic about how promises were made. Hurrem barely acknowledged any of this, sinking back into a sleeplike state.

Shebal bounded down to the shore, his muscles rippling under his black and white coat as he swiped at the water. His claws seemed to glow in the moonlight.

"You promised not to hurt them!" he roared. "You said the island was only hidden!"

The smaller cats gathered around us in a ring. The serval and the lion seemed restless, but stayed where they were, only inches from me.

On the beach, Shebal stood up on his back feet and slashed at a spout of dark water that rose from the lake. He didn't make contact, and backed off a good bit when the tallest lakefellow from before stepped onto the sand. Though he was still far away, more of his features were visible now: he had feet that were like the flippers of a seal, and his muzzle looked like a cross between a shark and an otter. His ears were ridged with spiky fins, and he had a pair of glowing, triangular amber eyes set high up on his face. He had a long, black braid that wrapped around his neck loosely, like a scarf. His tail was sleek and held at a slight angle at his hips, snaking around in the wet sand behind him. I stared at him for a long moment, too overwhelmed to remember where I recognized these features from.

"It is hidden," he said in a rough, sandpapery voice, "and I didn't break any promises I made to you. Your family is safe, all of the catfolk are. I did everything I could to assure that."

Shebal swayed, growling deep in his throat, but he had nothing to say.

A sudden screamlike yowl from behind him startled him so much that he jumped two feet straight up. Hurrem had exploded into action, twisting around midair and tearing through the short grass to stand beside his son. He crouched defensively, lashing his tail, his ears pinned back.

"Get away from my son," he caterwauled, trying to push Shebal out of the way. "You already took enough from me. I won't spend another night thinking my only son has died by

your slimy hands!"

The water ruptured and the two other lakefellows emerged, riding on lumpy, black waves.

Shebal moved between his father and the water, standing tall and using the same growling tone on both sides. "Stay back. Both of you, stay back. There's no need for this. We need to communicate and make things clear to everyone."

Hurrem was a little caught off guard, staying quietly in his crouch.

Beside me, the lion stood up and shuffled forward a bit. The serval stayed at her side and together they walked closer, Temmey at their heels. The circle of cats broke and melted back into the grass, but as Temmey beckoned our group closer, I felt the eyes of the catfolk watching over us.

Shebal looked embarrassed, like a kid who'd been caught doing something bad. He was only able to look his father in the face because Hurrem couldn't see through his depressed haze.

"Father… My sisters and my people… I'm sorry. This whole chaotic month has been my fault. I ran away to work at this camp with Jason because I wanted to be close to my beloved without setting off the alarms every time we met. I know I should have said something, or at least come to you when you sent Jolly and Vetsey to watch the bus arrive. I should never have allowed Jolly to injure Jason and scare these children. I never should've turned my back on my family and my friends when I knew they were scared on both sides…" He looked across the meadow at the whole group of us. There was something deeply hurt in his eyes. I hoped it was coming through his voice enough for Hurrem to know.

The old puma stepped forward, extending his neck and brushing his whiskers against Shebal's muzzle. Shebal closed

his eyes and they shared a silent moment. Around us, the cats seemed to slowly relax. I wondered what they were all understanding that I couldn't. Somehow, I knew what they were feeling when Laurie shifted closer to me and put her warm hand in my ruff.

Hurrem let out a shaky, defeated sigh. "Do you mean to tell me you love one of the lake monsters that took my husband and our home?"

Shebal stiffened visibly, but didn't growl his response. "Gownik and his friends were not involved in that. In fact, they have something to tell you, and so does your eldest daughter…"

Temmey sighed and looked at her paws, twitching the tip of her tail.

The tallest lakefellow stepped forward, his dark blue skin glistening in the moonlight. He knelt in front of the King of the Catfolk, moving inelegantly out of the water. In a rumbly, watery voice, he said, "I am honored to finally meet you, father of my love. It hurts me deeply to know that our actions have caused this kind of fear and pain in you. I promise, with everything that I am, that alongside my friends, Jegmet and Gobett, I have done everything we possibly could to prevent our people from harming yours. And we have succeeded. Your home and your family will be returned to you, without fail, by dawn's light, regardless of the outcome of our meeting. It can be earlier, though, if you accept peace between the Catfolk and the Lakefellows. I will not ask for your son to be my husband after the awful treatment you have faced, but our people do not want to fight yours anymore."

Hurrem heard all this with a stonelike stillness, which seemed to scare Shebal beyond any of the events of this night.

Laurie and Cherry crouched down on either side of me. I

could smell the fear on their breath, but there was also a sense of wonder in the air, and, strangely, belonging. We all seemed to be holding our breath, waiting for Hurrem to make a choice.

"We're in a fairytale," Laurie whispered, her delicate voice right in my ear.

The fresh midnight air held us tightly as the moments stretched on. When nothing had been said, Abigail and Ripley stirred behind us. They picked their way up to the front, where Gownik, Shebal, and Hurrem turned to them.

"I don't want to be rude, King Hurrem," Ripley said in a squeaky voice, "but I don't see why you wouldn't take this offer. I've heard a little about the conflicts here, from the nice men who run the convenience store up the road, and they're scared for their safety. Your wars have lasted years and forced them to move off this island to live behind their store, and to fortify the land around it. They don't want to get hurt just as much as you don't want your family getting hurt."

Temmey stepped up to his side. "The boy is right. Father, this is a mutually beneficial offer. Without war, we can focus on uniting our people, keeping each other safe and growing our cultures together. If we abandon violence and fear, holding our love and family at the front of our minds," she paused, looking warmly at her brother, "we will find a richness of opportunity together."

Abigail smiled brightly, bowing her head. "Neither of you really want to see the other hurt, right?"

If it was organic or if it was Abigail's influence I couldn't tell, but the murmur of agreement extended several meters beyond the shore. The water bubbled and a dozen or so glowing eyes blinked below the surface.

Hurrem looked completely relaxed, and the sigh of relief from

Temmey told me that this was the first time in a long time that he'd felt that way. She padded up to him, gently brushing his shoulder with her muzzle, and vocally agreed with Abigail.

Hurrem took a moment to breathe, then bowed his head to Gownik. "I'll take your offer, Gownik of the Lakefellows. We will bring our people together in peace… And, if your promise is true and my darling Morcair is safe, then I give you my blessing to marry Shebal."

The lakefellow shuddered with excitement, his tail dancing on the wet sand. "I can assure you my promise is as true as my love for your son. Thank you beyond words."

With that, the water rose to swallow him. The bubbling mass in the lake whirled along the edge of the island. Our whole group, cats included, rushed to the shore to watch as it surged upward, flashes of murky browns, yellows, greens, and blues visible in the twisting water. It plunged deep into the lake, deeper than I thought it even went, coated in moonlight. Waves rippled out and crashed against the stony shoreline, causing the smaller cats to leap back. Ripley looked like he was going to explode from joy and excitement as we watched the inky shadow twist and curl in the lake.

Suddenly, a sound like the earth itself was splitting open filled the night, sharp and hollow and deeply shuddering. Laurie and Cherry clung to me, shaking in fear. I kept my emotions steady and stood strong for them. Ronnie and Barclay jumped and held each other. Jason growled like a grizzly and moved ahead of us after looking us all over to make sure we were okay.

Halfway between the far edge of the lake and the shore where we stood, the surface of the water seemed to buckle and bulge. The waves came again as water rushed off the surface of something huge and egg-shaped as it rose from the lake.

The first thing we could see through the shiny air bubble that surrounded the island was the topmost branches of a massive tree. As it rose, more was revealed: the tree seemed to be made of dozens, if not a hundred different kinds of trees, the branches stretching out nearly to each shore of the small, circular island. On the branches were what looked like hammocks and hanging huts, which swayed lightly with the momentum. Shorter trees and underbrush made up the rest of the island, with only a couple feet of sandy beach. Right at the edge of the bubble, so close that the sand seemed to meld to the lakewater, was a massive black lion.

"Dad," Temmey mewled, her body trembling. "Look, Hurrem, please open your eyes…"

Hurrem did, and his small body exploded into action. With another haunting wail, he tore across the surface of the water. Stepping stones rose under his paws and stretched before him to meet the second island's renewed shore.

When the island stopped moving, the bubble popped in a shower of luminescent mist. The black lion bounded forward, moving slowly and purposefully. One of his back legs was stiff and small behind him.

"Morcair," Hurrem gasped, out of breath by the time they met.

"Hurrem," the big black lion said in a deep and loving voice. They embraced and shared their stories, standing in the shallows on the stepping stones.

Chapter Twenty-Nine (Ronnie)

It had been two weeks since the night in the forbidden meadow, where we said goodbye to the catfolk and the lakefellows, where Ripley and Abigail had helped end a war, where everyone had found out what Morgan could do. It was so late that it was early when we got back to camp, with Shebal and Gownik married and their people finally at peace. Before we split up for the night, I told both the counselors my secret, too. It only seemed fair. The next morning, and every day after, things were strange but there was a sense of correctness in the world. We were all closer and I got a feeling that the forest wanted us to be spending our summer in it.

I'd been doing better, too. Early on, I'd gone privately to Jason after dinner and told him that I really needed help. I kind of danced around naming what I knew was psychosis, but he got the idea. He also understood that it wasn't safe for me to go to a normal doctor, and this was a therapy camp after all, so he gave me a list of contacts both in and out of Silent Woods that he personally recommended for therapy, as well as routine medical concerns. He told me he would pass along the list to Mom, as well as his personal contact information, and help arrange transportation or anything else I might need. The simplicity of it and the unconditional kindness almost made

me cry in front of him.

Now it was getting close to the end of the camp. On the first day of August, when I woke up, I felt incomplete.

Studying my face in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, it kind of made sense. I'd spent my whole life ignorant of the world that I really belonged in, and my discovery of it was immersive, to put it lightly. Who wouldn't feel weird?

But that wasn't quite it.

There was a knock at the door.

I spat in the sink. "Brushing my teeth."

"Can I come in?" Ripley asked. "I need to do that too."

I reached behind myself and opened the door, rinsing my toothbrush. He stepped inside so I moved over, brushing my teeth over again with the wet brush. He grabbed his toothpaste and yawned.

"Do you really need to brush your teeth?" he asked.

I gave him a confused look.

"I mean, you drink blood, that doesn't really get stuck in your teeth…"

I laughed after spitting again. "I don't only drink blood. We eat together every day."

He snorted with laughter, looking embarrassed. "Yeah… I'm sorry, I'm just a little… I don't know. I'll miss being here with you, and being able to ask you any questions I want, and being taken seriously when I talk about this stuff."

I smiled, putting my toothbrush away after washing out the sink. "It's not like you're gonna lose my number. We'll stay in touch."

His eyes glittered happily. "Really?"

"Yeah, of course," I said, ruffling his hair. He laughed and swatted my hand away before primping it back up.

Leaving the bathroom, I grabbed my jacket, hat, and sunglasses before stepping outside. The air was humid and thick, but the sun wasn't unbearable. I wondered how the bugs were as it crossed my mind that maybe I could ask Barclay to go on a walk with me, alone, before breakfast.

"Hey!" Cherry called from her cabin, stepping out in her pajamas. She ran over in bare feet and made fun of my unbrushed hair.

"You literally look like you just woke up," I snorted. "At least I'm wearing clothes."

"These are clothes," she retorted. "These shorts have pockets. Why would pajamas have pockets? Am I bringing my keys and wallet to bed?"

We both laughed. Morgan and Laurie came out and joined us, holding hands. Cherry smiled so big and bright when she saw them, grabbing both their hands and squeezing. Something about this gave me butterflies, but I tried to push it from my mind.

We walked to breakfast together and all sat at the same table, with room for Jason and Shebal. We'd been doing this since that night. It had felt weird in concept, since the room was so big and empty, but it felt better being like one big family.

Abigail was in the kitchen helping the adults cook, so the girls and I tried to guess what was being made. Morgan wasn't allowed to try; we reasoned that her keen sense of smell wasn't cheating, but it wasn't fair.

When Barclay and Ripley arrived, they ran over and sat right beside me.

Laurie won; breakfast was pancakes with fruit. We ate slowly and talked for a long time. At first, Jason seemed a little on edge, glancing at his watch every minute or so, but eventually

he relaxed into the flow of conversation. He'd been pretty upset the first few days after the event, talking about how the camp had been ruined, and how horribly we'd been treated since we'd been kept in the dark about so much, and how he had barely used the time and resources to properly help us, and how he just wanted things to go smoothly. But none of us thought the camp had gone poorly, and we agreed that Jason and Shebal's support, especially after that night, had been fine, given the circumstances.

Barclay, especially, was enjoying himself more. That night had changed him. He still didn't openly talk about what he called the weird stuff, but he didn't shut down conversations or get upset about things like that anymore. He was much more willing to do activities too, and he had a bit of a competition with Ripley on who could do more. I'd had no idea that Barclay could climb a tree, let alone do it faster than anyone at the camp.

By noon, the humidity had barely cleared up, but the sun was behind clouds and the bugs weren't too bad, so I puttered around outside until Barclay stepped out.

"Hey," I said, a little too loud, anxiety making me jumpy. "Wanna go for a walk?"

He smiled a bit and I envied his calmness. "Sure."

We walked quietly around the woods for a long time. The forest had more bugs than the shores, so we eventually stuck to the edges of the island. Once we found the beach with the shiny shells, we decided to sit in the shade of a willow tree. He watched me arrange the shells into different patterns, smiling and resting his chin in his hands.

After a while of that, I flopped onto my back, laying in the warm sand. I crossed my arms behind my head and smiled at him.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Are you having fun?"

He bent over to take his shoes off. "Yeah. Are you?"

I nodded, getting sand all in my hair. "I just worry you feel left out or something."

He put his socks in his shoes and stuck his bare toes in the sand. "I'm enjoying myself. You're very cute and amusing."

I blushed and couldn't help a smile. "You think I'm cute?"

He blushed. "So what if I do? You are." He kicked sand at me.

I rolled out of the way, laughing.

"I am enjoying myself, though," he said, getting up and walking down to the water's edge. "I think I'm going to miss this place more than I would have if…"

When he trailed off and stared out across the lake, not really looking at the forest on the other side, I knew what he was thinking about. I propped myself up on my elbows, watching him watch the lapping water. He looked strong and a lot less separated from his surroundings than he had at the start of summer.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

He stretched out his back, raising his arms over his head. "It's a good thing, Ronnie."

That wasn't the answer I expected, but it was what I wanted him to believe. I got up and brushed myself off, walking over to stand beside him. He pushed his toes into the dark, wet sand, shivering a bit as the cold lake water washed over his feet. He was watching the bubbles being tugged back and forth by the tide, but I was watching him. The sunlight peeking through the clouds changed the dark tones of his skin and made his brown eyes glow in a way I couldn't compare to anything on

this Earth. His short, clean-cut black hair had grown out a bit over the month, and he hadn't shaved his scrappy mustache, even though I said he could use my razor. He looked better like this, I think. He was confident, strong, and soft, and seeing him here on this secret beach, I could feel it all.

"I'm really glad you came around," I said awkwardly, dropping my gaze to the water immediately. "I mean… I'm glad you sorted out your feelings about this place. And about me."

He smiled and laughed a little, looking as nervous as I felt. "I'm glad I did too. I… I would miss you a lot if we never spoke again, and if it was over something like this, I would feel awful."

"I would too. I already worry that I scare you."

His expression softened and he took my hand very gently. "You don't scare me. I know you would never hurt anyone."

"It's not just that," I stammered, butterflies making it hard to think. "Aren't I… Gross to you?"

"Because you… You drink blood because you're a vampire," he said, but it took less effort than I expected. "No, that's not gross. We all need to eat and drink. That's your way of doing it. And if it hurts you to avoid it, I wouldn't want to see you in that state."

"I wouldn't either… But you don't have to see me like that, or even risk it," I said, almost instinctively. I was trying to run away again. I swallowed and shook my head. "I… I'm not going to vanish from your life again. But I won't force you to be in mine."

He smiled a bigger and bright smile than I had ever seen on him. "Are you asking to be my boyfriend again? You don't need to be shy about that, I want that. I really do."

I wasn't sure if I'd seen him this flustered since I first asked him out. He was adorable and it made my heart swell with

happiness. I promised myself then that I'd be sure to make him this happy for as long as I could.

All I could do to respond to him, though, was nod.

He giggled and brought one hand to his mouth to cover his smile. "I'm sorry I'm being this way," he mumbled shyly. "I never stopped liking you."

"Liking me? What grade are we in?" I teased, but I felt faint from nerves and happiness.

His whole face went red. "Is it okay to say I love you?"

My eyes widened and I tried to speak, but again, all I could do was nod.

He laughed at me lightheartedly, squeezing my hand. "I love you, Ronnie."

"I love you too, Barclay."

Chapter Thirty (Morgan)

On the last day, my girlfriends helped me pack. We were all sleepy from the bonfire the night before, but if we wanted to get back by a good time in the evening, we had to wake up at the normal time. We started packing right after breakfast. The whole experience was communal, and if it wasn't so hot, I'm sure most of the packing would've happened outdoors.

Shebal and Jason came around just before noon to get us on the bus. We carried our things across the bridge. On the mainland shore, looking out across the water, I was sad to be leaving the island behind.

A few feet away, the water bubbled and a dark track appeared. Shebal excitedly ran in after it as Gownik rose from the water, only up to his shoulders.

"Where are you going?" Gownik asked, curling a long-fingered hand lovingly around Shebal's ankle.

"Me? Nowhere," he answered, reaching down to touch Gownik's face. "I'm seeing the campers off but I'll be staying here."

"No more running off," he teased sweetly, but there was seriousness in his voice.

"That's right."

The bus pulled up. I could see the driver's seat was empty.

We loaded our bags into the undercarriage, lingering in the lot for a while. Jason tried to kindly bully us onto the bus, but we made our goodbyes to Shebal and Gownik as long as possible, including every one of the catfolk and lakefellows who we knew by name. They promised to tell them all for us.

"Come on, guys, we don't want to be late," Jason said with a bittersweet sigh after a while.

We wrapped it up and got on. Laurie took the longest to say goodbye to Shebal. We watched him get smaller and smaller as we drove away.

I anxiously ate chips with Cherry as I worked out what I was going to tell Suzanne. We had been in contact a little bit over the month, but I hadn't told her what happened. Cherry held my hand as I waited for her to pick up.

"Hi," she answered.

"Hey Suzanne. I'm on my way back now."

"Alright," she said happily. "I'll be seeing you soon. You can tell me all about it then."

"Actually… I need to tell you some things now."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes." I bit my lip. "They all know I'm a werewolf."

"What?"

"They all know—"

"I heard you, I just… Are you… What happened?"

"There's a kid here who's a vampire. We found out about each other and a few kids knew here and there, so we decided to tell everyone together."

"That's very brave of you," she said warmly, but she still sounded surprised. "How do you feel about that?"

"Good," I said, smiling. Cherry squeezed my hand. "Great."

"That's a big relief. I'm proud of you."

I felt warm all over. "Thank you, Suzanne…"

"Is there anything else?"

"Yeah… Lots." I explained what happened with Shebal and the catfolk.

She listened quietly the whole time. When I was done, she told me she knew Jegmet, and that she's a lakefellow— which I knew— and that she's from Shimmering Lake. She wore a special necklace that kept her appearance hidden, aside from a few small traits. She asked me why I hadn't told her all this sooner, though.

"I've been having a really good time. And the two sweetest girls in the world both like me…"

She made a cute little noise of excitement, telling me again how happy she was, and how proud of me she was.

I laughed and told her I was happy too.

"What are you going to tell your family?" she asked seriously after a ponderous moment.

I swallowed and looked at the road whizzing by outside. "I don't know."

"That's okay," she said softly. "We'll figure something out."

I let my shoulders slump. "Yeah. I think I should hang up now. I'll keep in touch."

"Okay, Morgan," she said with a small sigh. "You're gonna do fine, okay? I love you."

"I love you too." I hung up. I put my phone in my pocket and rubbed my face.

"Are you okay?" Cherry asked, stroking my knuckles with her thumb.

I shrugged. "I'm scared of going home. Mommy doesn't know I'm trans and she won't understand us."

Laurie turned around in her seat to face us, tucking her legs

up and leaning over the back to put her hands on my shoulders. "Morgan?" she said, bravery gleaming her voice. "How old are you exactly?"

"Sixteen and a half, somewhere around there. My birthday is in April."

A wide, sly smile spread across her face. "You're old enough to decide where you live. My mother has been bugging me about moving out in the fall and she's willing to help pay for my place as long as I finish school. Do you want to live with me?"

I let out an overwhelmed whimper.

"It's okay, you don't need to, and you don't need to decide right now," she said, looking completely understanding.

"It's not that I don't want to… I don't want to leave my little brother and Pa alone with her. She's terrible to them."

Cherry pursed her lips. "My uncle is a divorce lawyer."

I thought for a long while. I was scared of making this big of a change, but it would be better for all of us. I trusted Laurie and I loved her. I wanted to live with her, and we could have Trace and Pa stay with us if they needed to. If my parents got a divorce, they would both be happier, and Trace would be safer. Hopefully. I worried Pa wouldn't get custody, but Mommy's relatives would vouch for him, surely, and the faculty at school.

"I think that would be the best thing to do," I whispered eventually.

Cherry pulled me into a hug, stroking my hair. "I love you. This will work out."

I told Suzanne. She approved of the plan, and even started looking at resources for us.

At the end of the long drive, all three of them were waiting in the parking lot, standing outside of the car. Trace ran up to the bus before I even got out, bouncing on his toes and shielding

his eyes from the sun to see me through the dark windows.

"Is that your brother?" Laurie asked, waving at him.

He waved back, excited but confused.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"He's like a little blond boy version of you."

My heart soared.

We all got off the bus together, and, thankfully, my parents kept their distance. We made sure we all had each other's numbers and spent a long time saying goodbye to Jason. I was the last one to speak to him, and he pulled me aside.

"I'm sorry if I scared you at the start of camp," he said softly. "I could tell you were uncomfortable around me."

"It's okay," I said, feeling weirdly childish.

"You could tell I was different, right?"

I paused. I wasn't sure if I had then, but looking back, it made sense that that was the reason for my discomfort.

"Not different," he corrected. "The same as you."

I smiled a little, warm feelings of belonging filling my chest. It was like we were in a cool secret club.

"If you ever want to come back, you're welcome to. And if you want to meet me or see my cottage or something, here," he said, and gave me a piece of paper with his phone number on it.

"Is this… Allowed?"

He frowned a bit. "Not normally, but I don't think this is normal. We have to watch out for each other, anyway. And I would never ask you to do something you'd be uncomfortable with, so don't feel like you have to take me up on this at all. It's just if you need the safety net."

I nodded and put it in my pocket. "Thank you, Jason."

With that, I joined my girlfriends, who were talking to Trace about the video games he was into. I had never felt so much

love all at once.

Pa came over and asked who Laurie and Cherry were.

We all froze.

Trace blurted, "They're friends of Morgan's, from camp."

The two girls nodded and introduced themselves. He took it fine, but told me we should get going. He let me say goodbye to them alone, with the bus between us and the car, so I could hug them.

The drive home was uneventful. I talked a bit about some of the normal things we did. Mommy was mildly happy because I managed to make some friends. When we got home, I didn't really unpack, leaving most of my things still in bags under my bed or in my closet. Slowly, over the next few days, I added more bags to those piles.

One night at dinner, Mommy brought up divorce casually all on her own. She was telling me and Trace that things would be changing soon. She didn't know how much would be changing, though. I kept that little comment to myself, and went to bed smiling for the first time since camp ended.

Chapter Thirty-One (Ronnie)

A few days after camp ended, Mom and I made homemade ice cream together after grocery shopping in the middle of the night. It was hard to find places that were open at all hours, but she didn't want me doing all the work on my own. She still let me go out in the daylight, but she liked spending time with me, and I liked spending time with her. I was a little scared on the ride home that our bonding time would feel forced, or mandatory, but this was genuinely fun. She taught me how to find good deals on things, and what is really necessary to buy. She even let me budget our spending money for the next couple weeks. I wondered, worriedly, if she was doing this to gently cut me from her life on good terms so it wouldn't hurt, but she seemed to be apologizing in her own way. I forgave her completely.

That night, we had arranged to have Barclay and Cherry stop by. We would all cook dinner together and, depending on when sunset came, take it out to eat in the schoolyard. It was homemade pizza, and whatever my friends brought.

While I was finishing washing down the counter and setting up the dishes we would need to use, there was a knock at the door.

"I'll take this over," Mom said. "Go let your friend in."

I hurried downstairs to the door. Barclay was there with a couple Tupperware containers. He was dressed smartly in a blue button down and skinny jeans. He looked very handsome, even though his shyness showed.

"Hey," I said, a little awkwardly. It had been a long time since he was over.

"Hey. Can I, uh, come in?"

I laughed and apologized, stepping out of his way and taking his containers so he could take his shoes off. I asked him how he was doing.

"Good. Nervous," he said, "but happy to be here."

We walked upstairs to the kitchen. A large, black spider crept along the counter. Barclay yelped when he saw her, grabbing my arm.

"That's just Mom, don't worry," I said, laughing. "Come on, Mom, you know he's scared of spiders."

"That's," he stuttered, "okay."

Mom waved one leg teasingly, then crept down to the floor and around the corner to the living room where she left her clothing.

Barclay anxiously agreed to go in the kitchen with me, holding my arm the whole time. I asked him what he brought, to keep his mind off the spider.

"It's called buuz," he said, telling me it was homemade Mongolian food, kind of similar to perogies. They were little dough pockets, filled with beef and onions and steamed. His father helped him make it before he came over.

We kept them in the fridge while we chopped green peppers and shredded cheese for the pizzas. We were just using canned sauce, a can of sliced olives, and premade dough, so there wasn't much work involved, and I felt a little silly. I supposed I had

hyped up the homemade aspect a bit too much. Barclay didn't make me feel bad for it, though, and it helped me feel a little less bad.

Mom let us cook on our own while she watched television in the living room. She told us we could call her in if we needed her, but we never did.

Before Cherry even arrived, we had put both of our pizzas in the oven. Mom didn't get one, of course. I remembered all the nights she'd spend puking after going out for dinner with guys. It made me happy to know she was past that.

Barclay leaned against the counter, watching me wash the dishes. We still had everything out for her, but I was getting worried we'd have to pack it up.

"I think I hear a car door," Barclay said hopefully.

"I can watch the oven if you want to go look."

He nodded and hurried downstairs. I sat on the floor next to the oven, feeling the heat on my shoulder and side. Listening to the low purr of the appliances in the kitchen, and the murmuring of the television through the wall, I felt safe.

Barclay opened the door after a moment and I heard him and Cherry talking, so I ran to the landing. She was getting her shoes off with one hand, holding a little wicker picnic basket in the other.

"I can take those, it's really no problem," Barclay was saying, reaching for the basket.

"No, it's fine, I've got it. I do more complex things one handed at work."

I said hi to her before returning to the kitchen to stay out of their way. They met me there and Cherry showed us the sandwiches she brought.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "I was teaching a new employee how

to make these. My parents think I should get a job somewhere else, since I'm moving out in a couple days, so the trainee is my replacement. I got one for your mom too just in case."

"Oh, I'm sorry, she can't eat regular food," I explained. "Thank you though."

She looked a little embarrassed, but said that Morgan would appreciate it. Barclay and I took our pizzas out, which made her even more sheepish, but we told her not to worry. She rushed through making hers and threw it in the oven.

"I hope your food doesn't go cold," she mumbled, helping me clean the counter. "Here, let me do all the cleanup. I feel bad for being so late."

"Really, don't worry about it. If we want to have a picnic, we've got to wait for the sun to set, anyway."

We finished cleaning together in time for her pizza to be ready. There was still about an hour of daylight left, so we piled onto the couch with Mom and watched the episode of the true crime show she was watching. She brought us her homemade lemonade and cookies. Even though I hadn't known these two at the same time when I was younger, it felt like old times.

It was a very late dinner and my friends were very hungry. All four of us went out to the field and sat on a picnic blanket. We shared good, mostly homemade food and felt the air get cooler around us. We talked about Cherry's plans to move in with Laurie and Morgan in their new apartment, and how Morgan was moving out tomorrow afternoon. Barclay told us that he'd heard from Ripley, and that he wanted to see us all at the end of summer, when he's back from seeing his aunt in Toronto.

"What are we gonna do with the rest of the summer?" I asked, laying down on the blanket and looking up at the faint stars that had started to appear in the darkening sky.

"I'll be looking for a new job and getting settled, for the most part," Cherry said with a happy sigh. "I'm excited. It's a big change, but it doesn't have to be scary."

"That's a very mature way to think," Mom said, putting her hand gently on her shoulder. "I'm proud of you. If you ever need anything, we're here for you."

She looked like she was going to cry, and quietly thanked her. Not liking all the attention, she asked Barclay what his plans were.

He blushed a bit. "That depends on what Ronnie's doing, I suppose… I think I'm going to get in better contact with my mother's family, though. I've been grieving alone for long enough. I need to get out of my own head."

We all told him we agreed, and that it was a great idea. I dodged around my plans for after I was finished high school, complimenting my friends' food.

After a while, we were all finished, and we watched the stars together. The wind roamed across the field, carrying whispers from the woods behind my house. Peace settled in the quiet evening air, followed by the songs of crickets and the gentle rumble of cars on the road.

Things were finally working out for good.

Chapter Thirty-Two (Morgan)

After breakfast, I told Mommy. She said very little. Her friend came to pick her up fifteen minutes later.

Trace met me on the step.

"She didn't take it well, did she?"

I shook my head, hugging my knees.

"It's okay. You'll always be my sister."

I smiled at him, but I felt sick. I had so much to lose moving out, but so did he.

"Are you gonna be okay here, when I leave?"

He furrowed his eyebrows and set his mouth. "Why are you worried about me? I've got Pa. I'm fine. You're gonna be all on your own, pretty much. You're about to be a real adult at sixteen… I couldn't do that."

"I won't be alone. I have Laurie and Cherry, and their families. I've got Pa too, in a way. But what if you don't get him? You're too young to choose on your own where you live, like I'm doing. We've got people fighting for us, but…"

He put his hand on my forearm. "No, stop there. We've got people fighting for us. That's what counts."

I gave him a melancholy look. "You're way more mature than you should be at this age, dude."

He laughed. "I don't think so. I think I do a great job of being

exactly who I should be."

"You do, of course you do… It's just not fair."

"I don't think fair really exists." He pushed a little rock around with his foot. "I don't think Mommy wants me."

I was stunned. "What?" I asked in a tiny voice.

"She's not really fighting for custody. The court just wants her to have it because nobody favors single dads." He sighed. "I don't know what I ever did to her…"

"You did nothing to her," I growled, grabbing his hand. "You're a good son, okay? Don't you ever doubt that. Her lack of faith in you, her lack of trust and care, is not a reflection of your character. You go out of your way to keep the atmosphere happy in our house, and we all know we need your help with that. Pa loves you and… And Mommy… I don't think she loves anybody in her life right now." I swallowed, letting go of his hand and tucking my hair behind my ear awkwardly. "That's nobody's fault but her own."

He looked at me, sad and thoughtful, but said nothing.

I smirked and shoved him a bit. "Lighten up, nerd."

He snorted and pushed me back. We wrestled for a minute, then shuffled away from each other, looking embarrassed.

"I'm gonna miss you."

"Yeah, me too."

We were quiet for a few minutes. I turned my next words over in my head and in my mouth, weighing them.

"Trace," I said eventually, suddenly parched, "I've got something important to tell you. But you've got to keep it secret. Nobody in the whole world can know."

He looked at me very seriously and nodded.

I started slowly, unable to look anywhere but the pavement between my feet. "When we lived at our previous house… In the

summer, when I was eight… How old would you have been?"

He thought, then said, "Four."

I sighed shakily. "Wow, you were little. You wouldn't have remembered, would you? When I came home with a bite mark on my leg?"

He paused. "Of course I remember. A stray dog got you. Pa showed us both how to get away from an angry dog once you had recovered."

"It wasn't a stray."

He started to say something, but stopped.

"It wasn't a dog at all. I was bitten by a wolf. She was stuck under a fallen tree. She was covered in branches, so I broke enough that she could get free, but I scared her and she bit me."

"That's scary… Why didn't you tell us it was a wolf, though?"

I bit my lip. "Because she apologized when she realized I was trying to help her."

He waited a beat, then laughed, almost nervously. When I didn't react, he asked if I was joking.

I shook my head. "She apologized so much. She told me she wasn't thinking and that she didn't know I was a little kid. She told me not to be scared, even though it was going to hurt the first few times, and that the full moon wasn't something I had to worry about. She told me I could control it, and it would get easier with practice. She told me not to tell anyone else or I could get hurt very badly. Then she left."

He didn't say anything for a long time. He studied his shoes, picking his laces apart with his fingernails. I told him not to do that after a minute or so.

"You're telling me you're a werewolf," he stated firmly, but not angrily. He wasn't scared, either. I had even been ready for him to think it was cool and get excited like Ripley had, but

he just seemed pensive. "You're telling me you're my big sister, you've got two really cool girlfriends, and you can turn into a wolf. I guess I'm the luckiest little brother in the world, huh?"

I tried to stop a smile from covering my whole face. "Are you serious about this?"

He punched my shoulder lightly. "Lighten up, nerd."

I started to shove him a little, but pulled him into a hug instead.

That afternoon, not long after Mommy got home, a car honked outside. I was ready for Mommy to be upset about it, but she hadn't said a word to me and nothing seemed to be changing that. She didn't seem angry, though. Just absent.

I checked the door to see Cherry and her brother leaning on the hood of his car. The trunk was open and Laurie was walking up to the door. I opened it and she jumped a bit, then smiled beautifully.

"Hi Morgan!"

"Hey Laurie," I said, my voice shaking a little more than I thought it would. I waved to Cherry and her brother, walking down to meet them.

Her brother shook my hand and introduced himself as Arty. I told him my name, then figured he knew. He helped us take down my bed, desk, chair, and computer. Trace and Laurie chatted in the kitchen while Pa made sure things were secure in the car. The desk and chair didn't fit, but the moving van, driven by Laurie's uncle, pulled up right in time. Once my furniture was in, Cherry and I carried my bags down and crammed them into the remaining space. Pa gave us all water and offered food, but we politely declined. He slipped me some snacks anyway.

We sat around the coffee table in the living room, waiting for Arty to come back with the car. Laurie shared my green chair

with me, since it was so big, while Trace sat on the floor like always. Pa had insisted that Cherry take his seat on the couch, but she sat on the floor too. We all knew she was avoiding Mommy.

Pa kept the conversation flowing. He asked us where the new place was, and what our plans were for jobs. Cherry talked about how her family ran a little restaurant and how she was looking for a similar job closer to our new home. Laurie shyly admitted to applying to work at a comic book shop. I said that I was going to wait until later to send my resume anywhere, but that I would be racking up volunteer hours with a community center that Suzanne mentioned. Boldly, I mentioned that the community center offers services for trans people looking to medically transition.

"That's cool," Pa said smoothly. "I'm sure it would be good for the younger kids to be helped by someone in the same boat as them."

"Exactly," I said with a nervous but deeply happy smile.

"Are you sure you'll be able to keep on top of bills and rent, though?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

Mommy nodded condescendingly. "You're all still in school. Will you really drop out for this?"

"None of us mentioned dropping out," Cherry pointed out casually. "I'll be finishing high school next summer and so will Laurie. She's gonna graduate with straight A's, isn't that right?" She looked up at us both lovingly.

Laurie blushed and rolled her eyes. "I'll try."

"I'll be working hard to get good marks so I can go to the Toronto Film School, or something," I added. "Laurie's family already said they'll help pay for our apartment as long as we stay in school, work, and pay for my tuition."

"I'll try to go to a university in Toronto too," Laurie said. "I'm not sure for what yet, but I've got a year or two to choose."

Pa smiled warmly. "You've got this all figured out… I'm proud of you girls."

Mommy looked at her feet, but there was the start of a smile on her face. Thinking we couldn't see, she brushed a tear from her cheek.

"Thanks, Pa," I said, reaching over the arm of the couch to hold his hand, love and hope blooming in my chest. "I love you."

"I love you too, Morgan."

The End

About the Author

Laika Wallace (she/her, he/him, it/its, sie/hir/hirs) uses fiction and fantasy as a tool to explore his experiences being an LGBT two spirit wo/man, reconnecting to his indigenous heritage, being a Reconstructionist Jewish convert, and living with his disabilities, autism, and other neurodivergencies. It lives on unceded Algonquin territory with its guinea pigs and snake. Aside from writing, sie also creates digital art, collages, mixed media pieces, music, and dabbles in sculpture and sewing. Some of hir hobbies include reading, hiking and walking in local natural areas, swimming, trying interesting and new soda flavors, Randonauting and urbex, and collecting pieces of broken pottery.

You can connect with me on:

https://laikacore.neocities.org